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COUNTESS DAPHNE.

COUNTESS DAPHNE

A Musical Romance

BY

"RITA,"

AUTHOR OF "DAME DURDEN," "MY LADY COQUETTE," "VIVIENNE,"
"LIKE DIAN'S KISS," "MY LORD CONCEIT," ETC., ETC.

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COUNTESS DAPHNE

—:O:—

BOOK I.

CHAPTER I.

"I INTRODUCE MYSELF."

I AM only a Stradiuarius violin.

Such an old violin, too—one that has been knocking about the world for a hundred and fifty years at least; one that has passed through many hands, and seen much of life and of human nature; one that has told its tales and sung its music to thousands of ears, careless, heedless, unappreciative, as the case may be; one that has at last found a heart to understand, and a hand to chronicle the records of its long career.

Not that I will permit my chronicler to inflict all my history and adventures on those that may chance to read these papers. Far be such a thought and intention! No reader would read or believe one half of such a memoir, and no publisher would undertake to issue a work so stupendous. A century and a half of loves, griefs, angers, hates, rivalries, and jealousies, have passed before my notice, but only a very small portion of these various passions will play their part in

this story—the story of one who loved me and owned me in far-off years.

My birth-place is Cremona, and my maker the famous Antonius Stradiuarius. I am perfect of my kind, and my value is estimated now at a price that, in those early days, would have been a fortune to my maker. I left his workshop with the stamp of his full approbation, but I fear he had little payment for his untiring zeal in my manufacture, and his ceaseless toil after that perfection in the minutest detail which have made his instruments superior to all others.

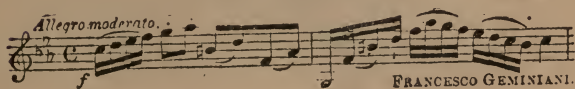
It always¹ has seemed strange to me that men will work so hard, and spend heart and soul and life only for the good or the appreciation of other men who have not half their genius, or nobility, or worth. I have seen so much of this, and I note how each age only repeats it, how each individual heart only suffers for it. The poet, the artist, the musician, the statesman, the writer, all seek the same reward for their labours, namely, the appreciation of their age. How few of them find it, or finding it, are satisfied with its scanty guerdon! How few— But there, I must not moralize over abstract wrongs. I have no desire to be set down as prosy, or have my words thrown aside unread. As I said before, human nature in every age is but a variation on one endless theme, and I ought to know something about it, after nearly two centuries experience.

I have been in many countries. I have studied life in many phases. I have lived with artists who loved me, and amateurs who made a show of me as they do of their old china, and old pictures, and everything that bears that magic word *antique* upon its surface. But I will merely relate one of the many histories that have come under my notice, the incidents of a romance in which I have had a share. Those who have played their part in it are dead and gone now. It is only I who live on and on, and yet am never worn out, or feeble. I see customs change and fashions alter, and one generation succeed another, and yet—am always the same. Only I mourn often and often as a strange hand wakens my melody, or a new touch

disturbs my peace and solitude. Only, as some wave of sound dies off my strings, and sobs itself to rest, like a weary child, I think of the man who has written it, and whose genius, like most great gifts, finds its recompense—too late! But now for my story.

CHAPTER II.

MY NEW MASTER.



"It is genuine 'Stradiuarius,' not a doubt of it. What splendid preservation, too! Sixty ducats, you say?"

"*Sì, signor*, and cheap it is, too, at the price. Only that I am tired of having it here so long—ten years in that case there, if a day—I could not let it go for that. But times are bad, and an offer is an offer."

I was in an instrument-dealer's shop—a dusky, dirty place as I saw when the bright morning sunshine streamed in through the open doorway, and lit up the curious articles which were crowded into every corner, and hung on nails, and peeped through broken cupboards, and were now all thick with dust, and in various stages of spoliation from long neglect and disuse.

A man held me in his hands and turned me carefully from side to side.

"How they got that exquisite finish—that perfect completeness," he murmured, "it is wonderful. The varnish is as good as when it was first put on. And yet this is a hundred years old, if a day."

"I have another violin here—a Guarnerius," said the voice of the dealer. 'It is just as fine—finer I often think.

If the signor needs it for public use he will find the larger instrument best. The tone is more sonorous, and carries further."

I was laid down, and the other violin passed into the hands that had so lately held me.

"Odd that a man who studied in the factory of Antonio Stradiuari should not have copied him more exactly," said the stranger, giving my maker his local name. "No, I don't like this; the build is slovenly; there is that same peculiarity, too; the *f* holes are cut almost straight."

"Try it; the tone is fine; Giuseppe at least used excellent materials."

The stranger took the violin in his hand again, and drew the bow across the strings.

"A master-touch," I thought, as I lay there neglected on the counter; "oh, if only he would try *me*?"

Meanwhile a flood of melody seemed let loose upon the air. The artist forgot place, time, scene—all and everything around him—and revelled in a world of his own creation. The tender melancholy sweetness of his notes filled the little shop and held the old man spell-bound, and drew a crowd of children round the doorway, all listening in breathless awe, and wondering delight.

He put the instrument down at last and then turned to me.

"I will try this now," he said, and played a few rapid passages, which displayed the wonderful brilliancy of his execution.

"Can you sing, little Strad?" he asked me presently, while the children held their breath in wonder, and the old instrument-dealer folded his arms and listened with placid content.

"It is like all the nightingales in May," he murmured wonderingly. "You are a great artist, are you not, signor?"

The player laid me down, but still kept his hand upon me.

"I *hope* to be so," he said with a sigh; "I am only a beginner yet."

"A beginner! and can play like that!" said the old

man in astonishment. "It is divine wonderful—I have heard many players in my time—many; but you——"

"Do not flatter, good Tonio," interrupted the stranger hastily; "never mind about my playing. I want an instrument; your Guarnerius is fine, but the Strad is finer. Is sixty ducats the lowest price?"

"Indeed, but yes——" stammered Tonio, "it is not much either. The violin has a history: the great Paganini himself had it once. It is no lie, indeed, signor. It fell into my hands through one of the maestro's pupils, and——"

"There, there, that will do!" laughed the stranger; "no more romances, if you please. I will give you the sixty ducats, but don't you trouble to give the violin a history, which in no way enhances its value to me. I don't suppose Paganini has breathed any magic power into it. He can have given it nothing that it did not possess already."

He laid the money down on the counter as he spoke. As he did so a child, who had been wistfully regarding him for some moments past, crept timidly up to his side and fixed his gaze on the empty case with a sorrowful regret that surprised the stranger.

"Who are you, little one?" he said, looking kindly down at the barefooted, brown-eyed lad.

"He is my boy, my youngest," said Tonio; "he has played on that Strad sometimes. I think he is sorry it is to go; he loves it, and all things that make music in fact. Don't you, Baptista?"

"Oh, is it going away?" cried the child piteously, as his colour changed from red to white, and his great dark eyes turned to the face of my purchaser. "Have you bought it?"

"Ay, that he has," answered his father, "and paid for it, too; and right glad am I of the money, for times are bad, as you know, Tista, and not a thing have I sold out of the shop for months past, and we with scarce enough bread for all their many mouths, and——"

The child interrupted the words by bursting into a passion of sobs.

"Oh my bird, my beautiful Rosignuolo," he wailed; "it will never sing to me now."

"Chut!" exclaimed the father; "this is foolishness; there are other violins here; you could not expect I would keep this one always for your pleasure."

"Can he play?" asked the stranger, wonderingly, as he looked at the small stature and baby face of the little lad.

"Play—oh, yes," said his father impatiently; "he plays strange things enough, too, sometimes; like no music that one has ever heard. He says the angels play it to him while he sleeps. I can't tell (shrugging his shoulders). The boy was always odd and full of fancies. He played on that Strad often, that is why he cries to lose it. There, Tista, dry your eyes, and run off."

But the child did not seem to hear him. His eyes were fastened still on me as I lay on the counter beside my open case, and his little bare chest, from which the white linen shirt had fallen back, still heaved with the sobs he could not repress.

"May I say good-bye to it?" he asked suddenly.

The stranger hesitated a moment. He scarcely liked to trust his new treasure into a child's inexperienced hands; but something in the little lad's wistful face and pathetic tear-filled eyes moved him to sympathy. He gave me into the eager hands that had so often held me before—yet never trembled, as they trembled now.

A rapt eager look crept into the boy's eyes—his face flushed beneath all its sun-kissed darkness. He took the bow and began to play.

It was not like any written music; not like anything that I knew, or had given utterance to before, but then I knew of old that Tista rarely played twice alike. A strange wailing solemn air it was that he drew from my strings, and yet so sweet in its sadness, so simple in its pathos, that I saw the stranger listen in astonishment.

The music was perfect—never a wrong chord, a jarring note, an imperfect cadence.

"The boy is a genius," I heard him murmur; "it is a gift of God!"

"Who taught you to play?" he asked at length, as the melody ceased, and the little hands laid me carefully down.

"No one," said the child simply.

"But how could you learn by yourself? it is impossible. Your ear may be correct; but phrasing, expression, style, all these you must have learnt, surely, from a teacher."

"I have watched Orgagna; he is sacristan at the chapel of San Stefano, and he plays the violin; he has one, but it cannot speak like this," answered the little lad.

"What was that you played—what music, I mean?" persisted the questioner.

The child looked puzzled.

"I played what I felt," he said dreamily. "It comes."

"Tonio," said my new possessor, as he turned to the dealer, who had been listening patiently to this colloquy, "your boy will make the world hear of him one day, if I mistake not."

"Pray do not fill his head with those ideas, signor," was the impatient rejoinder. "It is bad enough as it is; he is so idle, so useless, always dreaming, never thinking of aught that is useful or necessary. To me he is a sad trouble."

"Would you like to learn music, little one?" asked the stranger kindly. "I mean learn it as an art? The highest natural gifts are the better for cultivation and training, and in time you might become great."

The child's face flushed hotly. "Great!" he murmured. "Do you mean a great player—one whom all would listen to and wonder at—great as Viotti, Tartini, Masoni, Paganini? Oh that would be too much happiness!"

"You aim high," said the stranger dryly. "What do you know of these men you speak of so glibly?"

"He has all their histories by heart," said his father. "The sacristan fills his head with such tales."

"Ah well," said the stranger, taking up the case in which I had been replaced, "if I can help him, I will. I am a Florentine, but I stay here in Cremona the summer through. Here is my address. If the child likes to come to me once a week for lessons, I will teach him. He has a great gift—that I can see. I have many pupils, but I will teach him for the sake of his own natural talents—that is, if you care for him to learn.

The man grumbled something that sounded to me ungracious, but the child broke out into rapturous thanks that stilled his objections. After all he was fond of the boy, and if the saints had given him a taste for music it was better he should use it and get what he could by it. So he said at last; and then I heard no more, for I was carried off by my new possessor, and the old shop where I had lain so long, became a thing of the past.

I had been in many hands since I had been made, and age had improved and mellowed my tone, and I knew I was an instrument that any artist might be proud to possess now. It was true that old Tonio said, that the great Paganini himself had once possessed me, and taken me with him on a tour through Lombardy. He was but a youth then, and his days of fame were to come, and his father treated him badly and the poor young artist suffered greatly under his tyranny.

I had not been long in his possession before I was sold to a rich Italian prince, who had a famous collection of violins, and took a fancy to me. The sum he offered was so large that it aroused the cupidity of my young owner's father, and he insisted upon my being given up.

The Prince never played on me himself, but I was often exhibited to his friends and acquaintances as a specimen of the best workmanship of Antonio Stradiuarius, and I suppose this is all my new possessor thought necessary. At his death I passed into other hands. I was sold and re-sold. I was owned by artists and amateurs—sometimes played on and sometimes neglected, and finally found my way back to the old dealer's shop in my native town, where

I lay undisturbed for many years, to be finally purchased, as I have just stated, by the Florentine violinist, Francesco Delli.

I could tell many tales of the lives of those other possessors of mine, but I do not care to do so. None have had for me the interest and delight that this one romance I am about to relate has, and will have.

So, with no more preamble, I go on with my narrative from that far-off day when I was carried along by my new possessor through the quiet, sunny streets of old Cremona.

When he reached his home he drew me from the case and began to examine me closely.

"A bargain indeed!" he exclaimed. "I was fortunate to hit upon that shop of all others! Sixty ducats! why it is worth a thousand!"

He began to play, but seemed to grow dissatisfied; then put fresh strings on and took me up again, and tried over some more music.

The room was large and gloomy looking; instruments, and music, and books, littered it in every direction. I noted all this as I was alternately laid down or taken up. Another trial of me seemed still further to increase the player's dissatisfaction.

He put me down with a sigh. "Can a child's playing have put me out of conceit with my own?" he exclaimed, half aloud. "Psha! it is ridiculous!"

His hands wandered over the strings in soft *pizzicato* notes; it seemed to me he was trying to recall the air that little Tista had played a short while before. But he could not—try as he might.

"It was like no known music," said he impatiently. "Why should I trouble? Perhaps, after all, the boy is only like so many other children one finds in Italy, but never hears of as men—precocious geniuses that burst into sudden beauty like a laurel-bud, and then fade and drop fruitless to the ground. It may be he has a natural gift

of melody—that is all! Still, if he comes to me, I will very soon see—and then——”

He paused. What was to follow afterwards? Slowly he paced the room, uttering his musing thoughts aloud, unconscious that any one could hear them.

Then? Well, musicians are as plentiful as blackberries—and not half so welcome. Still this little, barefooted, ignorant lad had something in him I have not found before—something that will not easily die. One prize amidst a thousand blanks! one genius amidst a thousand nobodies! It may be so; I cannot tell. I have never won the prize, at least—and yet how hard I have worked! Work!—ah, that is just it. All the resources of inspiration, melody, phantasy, exhausted to please a capricious public—a public for whose amusement the artist is created; for whose applause—ephemeral as it is—he sacrifices health, youth, time, and feeling; for whom he exhausts taste and sentiment, to obtain—what? So many hand-claps—so much gold; then go away and be forgotten, or remembered, just so long as his music lingers in their ears! It is humiliating, but true! Who can feel as the artist feels?—who can comprehend as he would have them comprehend? Who is most to be pitied—the man who returns again and again to amuse those whom he despises, or the public who idolize their plaything one moment and abuse or forget it the next? Such is an artist's life, as men have made it—and this life I have chosen.”

“He is a cynic; he always talks thus,” said a soft voice near me. “You will get use to it when you have been here as long as I have. I suppose he is tired of me, since he has bought you. He often tires of his instruments. I am an Amati. You cannot see me? No; I am just behind you on the table. I have been lying there ever since he went out this morning. He has forgotten to put me in my case.”

“He is an artist, I suppose?” I said in that same language which, silent to all other ears, is audible enough to ours.

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"Oh, yes!" was the reply. "He might be a great one, too, I think—only he is impatient and capricious. I think he has had some great trouble or disappointment in his life. He takes a gloomy view of everything. But he is clever—oh, yes!—and he writes beautiful music, but the world does not seem to care about it—yet. That is hard. You see, when one spends life and labour on a thankless service to one's fellow-creatures, it is apt to sour and disappoint one at the last."

"But he is young?" I said.

"In years—yes; but he has suffered much, and seen much, and that robs a man of youth very soon."

"Have you been long in his possession?"

"Fifteen years," was the answer. "We have travelled much in that time, and been in strange and beautiful cities, and he has been fêted and made much of often, but—well, you heard what he said just now—he is always so. Nothing seems to please him quite."

"Does he stay long in Cremona, do you think?" I inquired.

"I believe for the summer. But he has strange fancies. He may go off at any moment, just when the whim seizes him. He is a man who likes to be free. He never will bear to be tied down to a long engagement, or a settled plan of action, for any lengthy period."

"Perhaps that accounts for his want of success?"

"Perhaps so. I do not know much about him. The 'cello there can tell you more than I. It has been in his possession for years—from the time he was a child. He used to play it. Now he will only play the violin. I wonder why he has bought you. He has so many already."

"But I am a Strad," I said proudly.

"So I see. I knew that in a moment. That may account for his purchasing you. He has two Amatis, a Guarnerius, and a Steiner. I suppose he wanted to make the collection complete."

"Does he play much?" I asked

"All day long, sometimes; at others he won't touch an instrument for weeks. Then he composes, though."

"Does he live alone?"

"Yes. He seems to have very few friends, and none of them are women."

"He is not married?"

"No, nor likely to be. He is a strange, self-absorbed man—he lives in a world of his own. He has had love passages, but I don't think his affections are his strong point."

Whatever rejoinder I was about to make was stopped by the subject of our conversation advancing and putting me back into my case. Then the lid was shut down, and I was left to solitude and darkness.

CHAPTER III.

TISTA.

"How narrow the bounds,
And the world is so vast.
And Time flieth so fast."

GEIBEL.

A FEW days passed on uneventfully. The violinist would take me out of my case and play for hours together, sometimes beautifully, sometimes dispiritedly, according to his mood. He was a fine artist; of that there was no doubt; but he rarely seemed satisfied. He was easily discouraged; and he had set himself a standard of excellence so high that all his powers fell short of it.

One morning, when he was practising, a timid knock came to the door, and, in answer to his "Come in," the little lad Tista entered.

"You!" exclaimed the violinist in surprise. "What do you want?"

"The signor was kind enough to say he would give me a lesson if I came," said the boy timidly. "Has he forgotten?"

"No," said Delli good-humouredly, "I have not forgotten. I am glad to see you. Come and play me that air you did the other day. I cannot forget it; but the 'Strad' will not sing it for me as it did for you."

The boy coloured all over his shy, pretty face. He took me in his small hands, and touched me with the fond reverential touch that he always had for any instrument that made his one joy—music. "My *rusignuolo!*" he murmured, in a passionate ecstasy, as he laid his chin on me caressingly, and began to play what Delli bade him.

The violinist listened silently for some ten minutes.

"That will do," he said. "Now, can you play anything from music?"

He pointed to some sheets lying open on a music-desk. The lad looked puzzled, and shook his head.

"No; I do not understand that," he said.

"Would you like to learn?"

"Oh, should I not?" he exclaimed breathlessly. "But is that—music?"

"Of course."

"I thought music was all sound—something that one feels when one is gay or sad; something that says everything one cannot say oneself."

"To you, at present, it may be so; but music is an art like painting or sculpture—something that carries the thoughts of one man to generations that live long after; something that is never forgotten when the brain that has given it being, lies mouldering in the dust; something that gives a sovereignty greater than kings own, or wealth commands."

The boy's face grew very pale; his arms held me to his breast with a closer pressure.

"Is it all—*that?*" he cried in wonder.

"All that, and more," said Delli, waxing enthusiastic over

the idol of his own dreams, and forgetting for a moment how far from realization those dreams still were. "It is the one pure, beautiful thing in a world of sin and vileness. A painter's art may degenerate into sensual bondage; a sculptor's idealize the body and forget the soul that gives it a beauty beyond mere physical perfection; a poet may lead others into ignorant worship of something his passionate praise and glowing verse have immortalized, even in its unworthiness; but music—music alone—commits none of these errors. From God it comes direct; to God its highest raptures alone return. Its birthplace is heaven; its life is immortal. To men it gives forgetfulness of all life's sorrows and sufferings; it raises the soul above its earthly bondage; it makes one forget that need, poverty, hardships exist; it would give a man his life's best happiness to know that he had poured out his whole soul, being, imagination, mind, into one strain so perfect and so great that all who heard should *feel* its beauty for all time, and so could not forget him even—if they would."

He ceased suddenly. I felt the childish hands that held me tremble; the little chest against which I lay, heaved with a sudden storm of emotion.

"To be this," he murmured breathlessly, "to be great with such greatness, oh, signor! will you help me? What your words said has been in my mind so long, so long! only I could not tell it. But it is here, all here. And when they laughed I was so sad, for none would listen or understand; and when I see the saints in the churches I tell them, and in my dreams they come and whisper beautiful things; and I try to put them into music when I wake, and oftentimes I cannot. But I know this — I would die a hundred deaths only to be as you said for one day of my life—only to know that something I had made into music as *that* music is there, would live in men's memories, so that, hearing it, they would say, 'He was only a little humble lad, but his music is great!'"

"My child," said the violinist, with a gentleness I had

not thought was in his voice, "what I can do I will; but for all I teach you, you have one gift I cannot bestow; it is genius."

And he was right.

I knew now what his own music lacked; what, despite all the marvels of execution, all the pathos of feeling, all the sentiments of expression, made it fall on the ear with less of charm and less of power than did the simple expressive melodies of an untutored child. It was the spark of the sacred fire from the altar of art—the one thing that neither teaching, nor skill, nor study can bestow. It was wanting in the great artist, of whom the world had uttered many praises and flattered with honeyed words, and yet it lived and burned in the struggling soul of a little ignorant peasant lad. Strange freak of nature; and yet no less strange than true. The world has many such histories. I but add one more to the number.

Tista's first lesson began.

It was by no means so successful as might be imagined. The signs, the notes, the marks, were very puzzling to the little ignorant lad who could barely read; but he had an untiring energy, an enthusiastic devotion, and an admiring reverence for his teacher that moved Delli strangely. At the end of two hours he dismissed him.

"Come to me to-morrow at the same hour," were his last words. "And, stay—you have no instrument, have you? It is of little use if you cannot practise yourself. Suppose I lend you one?"

The boy uttered an exclamation of wonder.

"The signor is too good," he murmured.

Delli laughed, and went over to the case where the Amati lay.

"Take this," he said; "there is no heed to tell you to be careful. Keep it in the case when you are not playing, and take three hours a day, at intervals, for practising the bowing and the scales, as I showed you. Do not attempt anything else at present."

The tears came into the little fellow's eyes. His lips

opened, but no words would come. He dropped on one knee and pressed the artist's hand to his lips.

"You foolish child," said Delli impatiently; but the blood flushed his face, and his voice had no anger, despite its impatience.

Then Tista went, carrying the Amati with him. I wondered how my new companion liked the change of ownership, and resolved to make use of the first opportunity to ask the question.

"I believe I have done a foolish thing," said Delli, as the door closed, and the little eager footsteps died away in the distance. "Launched another struggling life on the tempestuous sea of art. Why did I not let him be? If he had grown up in ignorance and solitude, he might have outgrown the craze that has taken possession of him. And yet I could not help it. I should do it again, poor little lad. Will Fate revenge herself on me for meddling with him? Shall I ever regret it? Ah, little Strad, you must answer for it if I do."

And in the years to come I did answer, though now it seemed to me only natural that he should have acted as he had done, and I thought not of Fate or Fortune, nor knew that he who meddles with either, will as surely live to repent it.

CHAPTER IV.

' BE FAME THY GOAL."

' Be fame the goal thou choosest,
So play an earnest part."

KALMAN.

THE little lad sat writing at a table. His lesson was over, and the Amati and I were lying side by side, while Delli stood by his stool explaining to him some rule in counterpoint.

"What do you think of him?" I asked my neighbour. "Were you sorry to leave here and pass into his keeping?"

"At first, yes; but not now. He is a wonderful child. I am rarely out of his hands. The boy's whole soul is music. If he wanders out of the town, or goes to the sacristan's gardens, or strays up to the hill side in the moonlight, it is always with me in his arms. All his thoughts and feelings are set to melody. It is wonderful."

"He is a second Mozart, then?"

"Mozart!" said the Amati, scornfully. "He has more than Mozart's genius, and treble Mozart's disadvantages to contend with. . . But the world will hear of him one day, or I am much mistaken."

"Has he any friends—playmates?"—I inquired.

"Ah, I forgot. . . The old sacristan that plays the organ at San Stefano, lives in a little cottage far out of the town. With him there is a little child. Tista calls her Daphne. They say she is old Giovanni's grandchild. I do not know. She is a lovely child, and lonely and quiet like Tista; an odd, quaint, dreamy, self-absorbed creature, with a voice that is all music, and a face that moves one strangely. She is motherless, companionless, save for Tista and old Giovanni. She sings in the church, and in the processions on saints' days. Tista is with her often. He was teaching her the violin the other day. It was surprising how quickly she learnt."

"Is she a genius, too?" I asked; "the children of Italy seem to have music born in them."

"So they have, many of them," was the quick answer. "They have the inheritance of melody. Music is ever on their lips—in their hearts. It seems to come to them as the song comes to the thrush in springtime, to the night-ingales in May. There is always music throughout the land. I have travelled much, and know it. One hears lutes at the cottage doors, and chants from the waggoners' carts, as the driver takes his mules through the standing corn; and songs from the goatherds on the mountain sides, and the *contadini* in the fields; and the fishermen sing to

their mandolins, and string notes of perfect rhythm and sweetest measure, which only the waves and winds can hear. There is so much natural genius, and so much exquisite melody everywhere, that the people rarely notice it. Little Tista might have grown up in a dusky old shop yonder, none remarking or caring for his talents, thinking he had only a surer ear, a sweeter trick of melody than most of the little fellows who play and sing and hum their *stornelli* the whole day through. But if Delli takes him up, it will be different. He is a splendid teacher, and the boy has aptitude and patience. Yes, he will be great, doubtless!"

"I have lived with artists who are *great*, as you call it," I said; "their private lives were very unhappy often."

"I know that. It is so with all earthly attainments. The fruit that looks so tempting to the eye is rotten at the core. The prize men languish to attain, once gained, is valueless. It is ever thus with what they falsely term happiness, or joy, or greatness. I have seen so many lives wasted in the same effort; cursed by the same fallacy."

"Yet each generation seeks it afresh?"

"Of course; what would you? To each individual existence, suffering, rapture, pain, joy come as a new experience. Each heart that loves thinks no love was ever like its own. Each life that suffers imagines none others have suffered in like manner before. Thus it is that life is the one tireless strain in all the music of humanity, because life to each separate individuality is ever new and strange and wonderful, and no one can ever be brought to acknowledge that any other life is a type of its own—that any similar feelings to those it bears are swaying other inclinations, and moving other hearts, and rousing other passions from age to age, from generation to generation.

"You are a philosopher," I said admiringly.

"I have been in many lands; I have seen much of life, and what I have heard and seen I remember—that is all," was the reply. "I have studied all grades of

character. I have lived with aristocrats who were worshipped by a world they cheated, and committed every sin in the calendar, and yet contrived to die in the odour of sanctity. I have been with poor men, struggling men, vicious men—good women and bad—fashionable women and nobodies. If I had not contrived to learn something about their ways, it would be odd indeed. I will tell you two things. The worst man I ever lived with was a priest, who afterwards became a cardinal; and the worst woman a princess, who was so exclusive that the very breath of scandal was never allowed to touch her ears, and who founded a church and a hospital with her own private fortune.”

“They were hypocrites, then?”

“Yes—but successful ones. The strange part of the matter is that they both considered themselves quite as moral and respectable as the greater part of their fellow-creatures. My princess (she was a Russian, I must tell you) actually dismissed her favourite lady in waiting because her husband ran off with some one else’s wife. ‘It would not do,’ she explained, ‘to have any one at her court whose domestic life could not bear the light of day, or of whom scandal could utter a whisper.’”

“But it was not the wife’s fault?” I said eagerly.

“Of course not, but my princess was so highly moral that she thought the sins of the guilty should be visited on the innocent—not only thought it, but acted on it. You see she knew that the more rigidly the outside of the sepulchre was whitened, the less fear would there be of any one looking at the uncleanness within. Have you lived much with women? I hate them. They take a craze to play on us; and then, because it needs patience, or intellect, or study, we are tossed aside like a useless toy. I have lived with them often, that they might have the pleasure of exhibiting me to their friends as being very old, or very rare, or very something—just as if I were a bit of old lace, or a china monstrosity—not an exponent

of gifted men's thoughts—a teacher of the beauty they have conceived and I am capable of interpreting.”

“You called Francesco Delli a cynic,” I observed; “I think you are one also. I have also seen a great deal, but I could not talk about it as you do.”

“Perhaps you have not lived with women so much as I have.”

“No, I have seen very little of them,” I answered.

“That accounts for it. If you want a teacher of shams and follies, shifts, tricks, and scandals, go to a woman. If you want to be disillusioned of youthful fancies or elevated beliefs, to spice conversation with epigrams, to trifle over the most serious duties, to despise dreams, idyls, romance, go to a woman. Their ways are webs, and they are the spiders. Bah! I am sick of the whole sex. The good are so very good—they pall on one to utter satiety; the bad are so utterly bad—one can only wonder however they came to learn so much iniquity.”

“Good heavens!” I exclaimed, “I never knew—imagined—supposed that women——”

“Were aught but angels,” interrupted my companion. “There, you have made a string go with your energy. See, Delli is coming. He will take you away, I suppose.

“How provoking! I wanted to hear some more about Daphne and Tista.”

“To-morrow,” was the hurried answer; and then I was taken up and re-strung, and given into the little lad's hands as a reward for his zeal and attention to his lesson.

He played on me for some time—written music now, that a few weeks before had looked so strange and unfamiliar to his wondering eyes.

He played carefully, skilfully, and well. But, for my part, I liked his own music best.

BOOK II.

CHAPTER I.

THE AMATT'S STORY.

Daphne.

I DON'T know that I was pleased when Francesco Delli made me over to the care of little Tista so unceremoniously. I had been accustomed to be made much of all my life, and have lived with great artists, and made music for them; and now—to be a child's toy!

I was angered naturally. Besides, the Stradiuarius was my rival, and occupied my place in the quaint old music-room that Delli had beautified; and my old friends were there, and I could not speak with them, or unite my voice with theirs in those practices of chamber music that I loved. It was hard, I thought, and I was much displeased, and sulked obstinately when the little lad tried to woo me to forgetfulness, and cracked my strings with ill-temper, and would not be pacified for long.

However, all things must have an end, and so had my fit of displeasure. Besides, I always was an observer of human nature and character, and the life I was now leading had a certain charm in its novelty and the new experiences it showed. Tista was certainly a born musician. He thought and cared for nothing else. He rarely let me out of his sight. Every joy or pain or feeling of his heart was committed to me, and set to music the like of which I had never heard.

One day he took me with him to a quaint grey old church in the outskirts of the town. There was no service there at the time, but an old man was playing the organ, and Tista mounted the stairs and found his way to his side with the certainty of long habit. The organist did not notice him at first, and the boy sat quietly down in a dusky corner, and with clasped hands and wondering eyes, he listened to the sweet and solemn strains.

Gradually his fingers wandered to my strings; he drew the bow across them, and forthwith came a faint, sweet voice, sad as tears, tender as a dove's murmurs. It mingled with the deeper, fuller harmonies of the organ's notes as a song with its accompaniment; it thrilled and quivered through the silent church with a passion, an ecstasy, a loveliness, that was scarcely human. I saw the old man turn and gaze at him as his fingers wandered into a hymn of Pergolesi that they often sang in the church; the boy's ear caught it, followed it, then gave it out as though a solo voice were singing far above all others, and oblivious to anything but the rapture of its own interpreting.

The organ ceased. The old man turned to him with dim, wet eyes.

"Thou hast improved, Tista," he said. "What instrument is that—a new one, surely?"

"Yes," said the child eagerly; "it is only lent to me;" and then, in eager, rapid words, he gave the history of the Strad's purchase, and of Dell's interest in himself.

"Thou art fortunate, indeed," said Giovanni, When the recital was over. "Take heed, and learn well, Tista. Gifts and natural genius thou hast; but the greatest and best gifts need training, care, and culture. Men by music have excelled kings in greatness and in power. Maybe the saints will that thou shalt one day be a world's marvel, and a nation's pride."

"Are you going now?" asked Tista, as the old man rose.

"Yes; it is late, and I am tired. I have been here

three hours or more. Come home with me, will you? It is long since you have been, and Daphne misses you."

I saw the pretty boyish face colour with delight. He rose at once.

"I will come. I should like to show her the Amati," he said; and they left the organ-loft together.

Out in the streets the shadows were falling. The dusky light, the perfect silence, the drowsy warmth, all had a strange lulling, soothing effect. The old man and the little lad talked very softly and rarely. Both were busy with thoughts and dreams apart from the scene around them.

They stopped at last before a low-roofed cottage; a wide garden surrounded it—such a garden as only Italy can boast of. Venerable with age, yet green with eternal youth; and endless charm in its mossy paths, its broken statues, its wilderness of carnations, its tall flowering magnolias, its wealth of roses and lilies, its quaint and manifold cacti, its marble basins where creepers twined and frogs dozed in the hot mid-hours, its shady nooks and high box hedges. Tista knew it well and loved it as well. The gardens had once belonged to a villa, but it had been uninhabited for many years, and the monks of a neighbouring monastery had bought it and cultivated its fruit and vegetables; and old Giovanni Orgagna, the sacristan, had been given the use of the little cottage rent free, and had lived there for more years than Tista could remember, or Daphne either.

There was a mystery about Daphne, so people said. No one knew exactly from where she had come, or why old Giovanni, after years of solitude, had suddenly disappeared for a week, giving no reason for his absence, and then come back with a child—a child, too, who was quite unlike most of the dusky, black-eyed sturdy-limbed Italian children; for she was fair as a lily, with shining red-gold hair, and soft serious eyes that rarely smiled, and such odd grave, old-fashioned ways, as ill suited her baby years.

But Orgagna never explained or accounted for her

presence. An old woman who looked after his few wants, and cooked and washed, and kept the little dwelling neat and clean, served also as nurse to the child. Not that she needed much tendance, she was apt to say—for her quietness and solemnity were almost unearthly.

She was twelve years old now; a few months younger than Tista, and he was her sole playmate and companion. The two children loved each other dearly; both were alike in their strange unlikeness to the rough, careless, boisterous boys and girls around; and both had a fondness for music that was almost a passion, and absorbed all minor thoughts and feelings in itself.

As the old man and the boy drew near, they caught sight of her standing at the gate, watching the sunset. The last rays touched her head, and turned her hair to flame, and lit up her dark soft eyes, giving her a strange, sweet beauty.

"She looks like that picture over the altar," said Tista involuntarily.

Giovanni sighed.

"Our Lady of Sorrows, you mean? perchance the shadow of some sorrow rests on her; who can tell?"

The boy did not answer. He ran lightly on and touched the child's soft cheek.

"Daphne," he said, "I have come to stay with you a little while. Are you glad? and, look here, I have brought a *rusignuolo* that will silence all the birds with wonder. Is it not beautiful, Daphne?—a real Amati violin, that the good signor has lent me to play on whenever I like. Oh, and its music is so lovely; almost one could weep to hear it."

She turned to him with a faint smile.

"I am glad to see you, Tista; you have not been here for long. And so you have a real violin at last? Who is the signor? and what does he teach you?"

"Music—real music," cried the boy eagerly; "I know the notes and signs now, Daphne, and can play from what is written, not only what I hear when the voices sing to me in my dreams; oh, it is beautiful! The signor says

I may be a great artist one day—think of that. I have been so happy ever since. I feel as if I did not care for work, labour, hardships—anything I may suffer—so only I can learn and study what music really is; what the great artists have left for us to learn and delight in.”

“Then you will learn properly now?”

“Yes; he is giving me lessons every day. He is from Florence. He is a fine artist himself, and plays so that it is a joy to listen to him! And he knows so much—so much! Oh, Daphne, I feel so ignorant, and foolish, and stupid by his side, but yet he is so kind to me.”

“I do not think you will be hard to teach, Tista,” said the girl; “you live for music, I think. But now come in; we will go down to the broken fountain, and you shall play to me. I should like to hear your new violin.”

“Is it not wonderful to think that in this little wooden body so great a voice is enclosed,” said Tista, surveying me proudly, as he moved on through the shadowy grass-covered walks. “It can sing like the angels in heaven, and sob like the spirits in purgatory, and——”

“What foolish talk, Tista. You have never heard either.”

“I have; I hear them in my dreams often, and when I see the great picture, where the heavens are opened, and the angels look down, I can hear them singing just such songs as the violin sings to me.”

Daphne looked at him in wonder. When Tista talked thus he generally soared far beyond her. Music was not the passion to her that it was to him. She loved it dearly, but she dreamt of other things, was absorbed by other thoughts. To Tista it was all in all.

CHAPTER II.

"ANGELS' FOOD."

WHEN they reached the broken fountain they paused. Daphne threw herself down on the cool green grass, and looked up to where the great creamy cups of magnolia filled all the air with their fragrance. The glowworms twinkled, the bats flew by with dusky outstretched wings; the charm of a perfect silence fell over the beautiful old gardens and deepened with the deepening night.

"Why do you not play?" asked Daphne presently.

The boy still leaned against the broken marble; he did not even hear her; his eyes wandered over all the silent place; his rapt dreamy gaze took in all its beauty, and saw and felt in that beauty something which he could not have put into any words.

The white moonlight fell on the whiter blossoms, on the pale marbles, the broken sculptures, the girl's slight figure and dreamy eyes, and the little lad's absorbed and meditative face. An inspiration seized him at last. The music she had asked for came floating off my strings, and lent its charm to the hush of the summer night, and the sweetness of the summer air. All the mystic beauty that lay in the far-off heavens, the ethereal loveliness that wrapped the sleeping earth; the rest, silence, dreams, wonder, repose, that had filled his soul and held him speechless so long now found their way into sound, and filled the whole air with melody.

From that hour I never regretted that Delli had given me into his pupil's keeping. From that hour I loved the little lad as I had never loved one of my possessors before.

"It is wonderful!" said Daphne, clasping her hands and looking up at him with great, wide, astonished eyes. "Have you learnt that?"

"What I played? No."

"How does it come to you, Tista?"

"I cannot tell. As your voice to you, dear, I suppose. Are you going to sing to me now?"

"No," she said gravely; "it would spoil the music. I only can sing what I learn; you make music that has every thought and every feeling in it that the heart holds."

"Play, then, if you will not sing. Play what I taught you on the old deal fiddle that I used to bring. This instrument is so lovely, one cannot but make perfect music. Would you not like the signor to teach you?"

"Yes, I should indeed," she said eagerly. "I would rather be a great player than a singer any day."

"But your voice is beautiful, dear; you should not neglect it."

She took me from his hands to my no small disgust, and began to try my powers. She played a little simple melody that Tista had taught her—played well and skilfully, too, considering her age and sex. I do not care for women players myself, having seen too much of their caprice and carelessness to think them fit for anything that wants genius and absorbing devotion to bring it to any degree of perfection.

I may be wrong; if so, blame my experience, for to that alone I owe my opinion.

"That is very well," said Tista approvingly, when she had finished. "Is not the Amati beautiful, Daphne?"

"It is like an angel's voice," said the girl rapturously, as she gave me back into his eager hands. "Oh, Tista, how happy you must be!"

"I am," he said; and his eyes went up to the star-lit sky, from whence the moon's white glory fell on his face. "I used to pray, Daphne, every night, every day of my life, for something that would make music for me, and be mine always. It made me cry often to see all those instruments in my father's shop, and rarely—oh, so rarely!—would he let me touch one; and yet to see them lying dumb there when one might have heard them speak—it was hard!

Sometimes I could not help it; play them I naist. It was worth any beatings to feel that for one hour they could talk to me."

"What strange fancies you have, Tista! Talk to you?"

"Do not *you* understand that either?" he said reproachfully. "Can you not hear the voices also?"

Daphne shook her head.

"I love music," she said, "but I have not your gift, Tista. I wish I had."

"Are you going to stop here all night, children?" said the voice of the old sacristan suddenly. "Do you know how late it is?"

Tista started to his feet.

"I am so sorry," he said, hastily; "I forgot."

"Never mind," said the old man kindly. "Go within, and have some fruit and bread and a draught of milk. Music is all very well, but music is only angels' food, not mortals'."

The children took each other's hands, and went softly through the moonlit garden, and so into the little low-roofed room, where the frugal meal was waiting for them, and the old man's books and manuscripts lay piled about. They talked but little, as Tista drank his milk and ate his grapes, and then, promising to come soon again, kissed Daphne, and bade the old sacristan good night, and so went his way homewards in the quiet evening, with me still clasped in his arms.

How hot it was!

The mosquitoes, and gnats, and little white moths, were humming and droning around us. In the town all the doors and windows stood open for air, and lamps gleamed from the rooms within, showing young mothers nursing their infants, and children at their evening meal, and maidens leaning out to watch their lovers go by in the dim sweet light. There were groups at the shop doors, and in dusky archways, such as Rembrandt loved to paint, and men stood at the wine taverns in their shirt-sleeves, and boys and youths played in the streets. From one and all came

greetings as Tista passed them by. The child was well known, and loved too, for his gentleness and quiet, old-fashioned ways, and unfailing sweetness of temper.

They would have had him stay, and amuse them with some of his melodies, and those strange, sweet airs that were like no known music. But to-night he would not stay; he was weary, and the hour was late. He hurried on to his own home in one of the dirtiest and narrowest of the Cremona streets, and stole up the narrow stairway, and lay down on his little hard bed, with a sigh of intense weariness.

I was replaced in my case and laid beside him.

"After all," I said to myself, "I shall see more than the Strad. Delli never took me about as Tista does!"

CHAPTER III.

"THE LEGEND OF THE LAUREL."

It was a close, hot, sultry evening. Tonio, the instrument-dealer, stood at his shop door. In the houses around the people leaned from open windows, or lounged indolently in the balconies. At the little wine-shops and cafés, men were drinking and playing dominoes. There was no breeze to cool the intense oppression of the hot summer air, and already the stars were out, studding the sky with their soft bright rays. Tista came out of the shop, carrying me, as usual, in his arms.

"Where are you going?" asked his father, as he turned to the little lad.

"To Orgagna's," was the reply.

"You waste all your time there, Baptista, grumbled Tonio. "Why do you care so much for him? You should stay at home and practise"

"I practise there," was the answer; "besides, I promised to give Daphne a lesson."

"Oh, oh! are you turning instructor already?" laughed his father good-humouredly. "You begin betimes, Tista."

The boy coloured.

There was something girlish about him, as there often is in boys who have great gifts. Something tender, fanciful, wistful, that made him shrink from rough sports and jeering voices, and mockery or jests. He was full of foolish pretty fancies—he had a passion for every beautiful sight or sound—he loved solitude and idleness, and to make music speak his feelings out to himself alone. He would rather have sat for hours in the old sacristan's house, poring over crabbed old manuscript music or half-forgotten scores that had not seen the light of day for long, long years, than enjoy the merriest games or sports of other lads of his age or size. The old dusty, yellow pages had a history for him—a history of that greatness he longed to emulate, even though it might only bring such reward as Cimarosa, Pergolesi, or Paësiello found—ingratitude and neglect.

Now he did not answer his father; only the hands that held me trembled, and his colour came and went like a girl's. The old man moved aside to let him pass.

"Be off, then," he said. "Give your lesson, or study your own. You make great progress, Tista. I am glad of it. Once I did not care for your whim of music. I wished you to learn a trade; something that would make money for you—which I fear your playing will never do. It seems to me a poor living that one makes by music; however, you have no other thought—it is a craze. It must be, I suppose."

"You will let me learn it as an art?" the boy said eagerly.

"You may learn it as you can. I have not the means to pay for a foolish fancy. When you are a man, you will, perchance, be wandering through the country playing for a crust, as old Toto the beggar does. If so, blame yourself—not me."

“I will never blame any one,” the boy said softly. “But I do not think music will make me a beggar, father. I may be its slave now, but it will repay me tenfold hereafter. I am sure of it.”

“Well, well. You talk like a child. It is true you play so that it is a joy to listen to you, but in the world yonder they need so much. How will you get the learning?”

“I will get it,” the boy said determinedly. “It is hard, but none the less I feel I can do all that others have done. You will not mind my trying, father?”

“Try to your heart’s content,” laughed Tonio; “only when failure comes, don’t turn to me for crust or shelter. I have enough to do with your brothers and sisters; make your own way in the world, and that soon. Twelve years of age do you number now, Tista, and in two more you should be no more of a burden to me than Cecco is. But then, he has learnt a trade. To make money, Tista, one must study the wants of men; they will pay for what they need for their bodies, that is sure enough. As for minds and souls, it is sorry work ministering to them. There is many a history to prove it.”

Tista did not seem to heed his words. His eyes looked up at the blue tranquil sky—his thoughts were far away.

Then he turned and went down the busy, noisy streets, holding me close to his breast.

“Oh, Daphne!” he cried rapturously, as he reached the sacristan’s house, and saw his little playmate standing in the gardens waiting his arrival. “Oh, Daphne, I have such good news. My father will let me study music now. He will not trouble about my learning the business, or minding the shop, or being apprenticed to a trade, as Cecco is. Is it not good? I think the signor must have spoken to him. He is so kind, so kind; and now, perhaps, I can go to the art schools at Bologna, and learn all that is to be learnt, and the world will hear my music.”

“Tista, Tista, how you do run on,” laughed Daphne. “What a long tale. And you are quite breathless with

running, and this such a hot night, too. You will make yourself ill."

"But are you not glad, Daphne? I have been in such fear often lest I should have to labour or work at some rough trade as the others have done; and it would break my heart, I know it would. I cannot help it; there is something in me that makes me what I am. I care only for music. It is all my life."

The girl looked up at him with wistful wondering eyes.

"You are so strange, Tista. What will you be, I wonder, when you are a man?"

"Great, I hope, and famous," he said eagerly, "with my music in men's hearts, and my name on their lips. Ah, that indeed would be a life worth living."

Daphne was silent.

She had thrown herself down on the long wild grasses, and leaned there with a grace of attitude peculiarly her own. Tista stood beside her, the moon-rays on his flushed, excited face, his slight young figure drawn up to its full height, his eyes upraised in rapturous gladness to where the stars gleamed in the deep intense blue of the evening sky.

Standing thus absorbed in his own thoughts, he did not hear a step approaching.

Daphne did, and started to her feet, and stood looking at the stranger with serious questioning eyes.

"Why, Tista!" said the voice of Francesco Delli, "are you in the clouds as usual? I came to ask you to be with me an hour earlier to-morrow. I have some music I want copied. Your father told me I should find you here."

But all the time he spoke his eyes were on Daphne's face, while her calm, serious regard of his own never changed.

Tista started.

"Pardon, signor," he said, with his own natural grace. "You are very kind to trouble about seeking me. I shall be sure to come."

"And who is your friend here?" asked Delli. "Not a sister, I suppose, Tista?"

"A sister? Oh no," laughed the boy. "This is Daphne."

"Daphne," echoed the violinist, with a slight wonder in his voice. "What a strange name. Will you not sit down again?" he asked the girl. "These gardens are very beautiful. We will rest, and Tista shall play to us. I see he has his violin with him. Come, my boy, make music that will suit the hour and the scene."

The lad coloured softly and shyly. Meanwhile Daphne resumed her seat beneath the great blossoming boughs of the magnolia, and Delli threw himself down beside her.

"Are you fond of music?" he asked her presently.

"Very," she answered softly, looking still at his handsome face with the wonder that had filled her gaze when she first saw him.

"She sings beautifully," said Tista, as he touched the strings softly, and turned the tuning pegs, preparatory to commencing.

"I should like to hear you," said Delli.

"Oh, no," she answered hurriedly. "Tista thinks it good; but then he does not know. He likes to praise me. Indeed it is nothing. I love music, but I can do so little, so very little."

"She plays the violin too, signor," exclaimed Tista.

"Indeed?" said Delli, in some surprise.

"It is Tista who has taught me," Daphne said, colouring hotly as she turned aside. "He thinks I ought to learn music."

"So you ought. Especially if you have a talent for it. I will hear you presently, if you will play for me. Tista's pupil ought to be worth listening to. Who gave you your name?"

She looked at him, surprised by the abrupt question.

"My mother, I believe," she said. "I do not remember her. She died when I was very young. I have lived with my grandfather since."

"I saw a picture once; you remind me of it," said Delli musingly. "A picture of Daphne pursued by Apollo, the boughs of bay springing from her tender feet, her upraised arms changed to stems, her floating hair becoming twisted leaves—the face alone unchanged—a face like yours, strangely like. Ah, well, let us hope your fate will not be so tragic. If you wear the laurel of fame, may its triumph be sweeter than Daphne found love."

He spoke dreamily, as if his thoughts were far away. Tista and Daphne were both silent.

"Who was Apollo?" asked the latter presently.

Delli started from his abstraction.

"Do you not know? He was a god, and he loved Daphne. But you are too young to understand these things. Do not trouble about them."

She looked at him entreatingly.

"Nay, tell me," she urged. "I learn so little, and I long to know so much. It is Rome, is it not, where the gods are—the beautiful marble things that once had life, and lived on the earth? I should like to see them and know their histories, every one."

"The priests say it is wicked to speak of the gods; they were pagan things, and vile, many of them," Tista said rebukingly.

Delli laughed.

"Tell your priests to walk through the galleries of the Caesars," he said. "They will be converted, or I am much mistaken."

"Is it so beautiful?" Daphne asked him.

"Beautiful indeed. If you wish to see the incarnation of love, passion, strength, youth, sorrow, you will find it all there—in Aphrodite's face, in Ariadne's eyes, in the labours of Hercules, the grace of Apollo, the divinity of Eros, the agony of Daphne, the regret of Persephone. These and a hundred other lessons one reads in the silent marbles, the work of men long dead, who have written their names in letters imperishable—the heroes of a deathless fame."

While he spoke Tista forgot his music, Daphne her shyness. They both gazed at the handsome, eloquent face before them, with inexpressible wonder and interest in their own.

There was a great charm in Delli's voice. To both the children, too, it was new to hear any one talk as he did. He knew so much, it seemed to them; and all histories of art had a special charm for their ears, and lingered long in their memories.

For a time I was forgotten. Tista leaned against the broken fountain, his eyes on his master's face, while the light fell through the boughs and turned the leaves to silver.

"He was not used to trouble himself to entertain even great men," I thought wonderingly, as Delli's voice sounded on and on, and the stories and fables rolled off his tongue in the beautiful flowing sonorous Italian that was in itself music. "And for children—to exert himself thus—it is strange, truly."

He paused at last. He had told them much; of fair cities where he had travelled; of the mythical legends of Rome and Greece; of the rise and progress of art; the sweets of fame, the sorrows of genius. When he ceased Daphne's eyes were wet and misty; she was oppressed by a sadness she could not express.

Tista did not seek for words. He wove his feelings into sound, and played softly and dreamily on in the mystic, tender light, while Delli lay back on the twining grasses, and Daphne looked at him with soft, grave eyes.

I never forgot that evening. Sometimes I wonder now whether the fate that drew those three together was indeed so unimportant or heedless a thing as I then imagined.

The night closed in. Tista's music was like a requiem to the day's bygone hours, and silenced the nightingales in the laurel-trees, and floated up heavenward in the still, sweet, fragrant air.

Then Delli rose, and declining Daphne's timid offer of refreshments, went homeward through the pretty quiet town with Tista by his side.

"That is a lovely child," he said to the little lad, after they had walked some time in silence.

"Who—Daphne?" asked Tista wonderingly. He had not thought much about her beauty; he was so used to see her, and he knew her face so well.

"Yes, Daphne. You might bring her with you sometimes, Tista, when you come for your lesson. A little teaching would not harm her."

"She would be so proud, so glad!" exclaimed Tista delightedly. "Oh, signor, how good you are to us!"

"Nonsense!" he said impatiently. "I like to teach; it is no trouble; and one more makes no difference. I have no doubt you will repay me some day, Tista. I have grown weary of seeking fame myself; but I should like to live out its raptures in the life of another."

Tista was silent. Perhaps he could not understand.

BOOK III.

CHAPTER I.

THE STRAD'S STORY.

As time went on I was greatly surprised to find that day after day Tista came for his lesson accompanied by a girl, about his own age apparently, but taller, graver, more serious-looking than himself.

This was Daphne—the Daphne of whom my friend the Amati had spoken, the grand-daughter of old Giovanni Orgagna, the sacristan.

Delli taught her too. She played well, wonderfully well, it seemed to me, but not as Tista played; that was not to be expected. Yet Delli took far more interest in her than in the gifted little lad whose talents were so remarkable, whose zeal so great.

Thus two years went by, Delli remaining in Cremona, and giving up most of his time to teaching, and only now and then playing in public at some concert of his own. When the two years were over he declared his intention of going to Bologna, and offered to take Tista with him, and place him at a regular musical academy, where he might study for his future profession under competent masters.

It was the dawning of a new existence for the boy—he was nearly beside himself with rapture when he heard of it. Daphne alone seemed sad at the thought of losing her companion. But she always felt that his affection for her was nothing in comparison to his love for art—that

was a passion engrossing his whole nature—bearing him on its wings of fancy to a realm she could never reach. So she sorrowed quietly, and grew sadder and more silent than ever, while Tista talked only of the glorious career opening before him, and dwelt everlastingly on the goodness and generosity of Delli.

“Some day I will repay him all he has done for me,” he would say. “Some day he will be proud of his pupil—the pupil who will always delight in saying he owes everything to him.”

“You will forget us all there, said Daphne, sorrowfully, as they wandered in the old familiar garden-paths the last evening before he left.

“Never!” said Tista eagerly; “I will always come back when I can; and when I am famous, as I hope to be, I shall come for you, Daphne, to share my fame and live with me, and we will wander through all the beautiful cities and countries; and everywhere we go there will be music, and people will say, perhaps, that I have not been useless or idle all my life, when I tell them the beautiful things I feel and can write down and hear others play, and know—when it moves them or pleases them, and leads them to gentler thoughts and purer hopes—that I have not wasted my days, dreamer as you all call me.”

Daphne sighed.

“I daresay you will be all you say,” she answered, “but you will not want me then, Tista.”

“I shall want you more than ever,” he said eagerly; “no one has the patience or sympathy with me that you have, Daphne. I love you better than I do my brothers or sisters. I shall never forget you. Why—forget you—it is impossible. You are as much a part of my life as my music.”

And he kissed her softly under the great magnolia-tree, while the cool fragrant darkness of the night hid her flushed face from his eyes.

“It is an idyl,” I said to the Amati, who told me this afterwards.

"Yes—now," was the answer. "But a few years hence it will be all changed."

"How can you tell?" I asked.

"How?" was the contemptuous rejoinder. "Have I not lived with women? Daphne is older far than her years now—in five or six more she will be no longer the dreamy, serious, soft-eyed child who sees in her face no trace of the empire she may hold, the power she may wield, in a time to come. She and Tista will never meet again as they have parted to-day. I know it."

When my friend asserted an opinion so dogmatically and assuredly, I never attempted to question it. Argument was never my strong point. I remained silent now, and presently the Amati resumed the conversation.

"His body may return here—his soul, never. As for Daphne, I do not think she is made to stagnate in the dull, ordinary existence that is hers now. Despite her quietude, there is something in the girl's nature that will one day assert itself for good or evil."

"For evil?" I echoed wonderingly; "I do not think a saint could be purer—more innocent—than she."

"All women are innocent till they are tempted," was the answer.

"Hers is not likely to be a life where temptation will enter," I said.

"There I differ from you. I have seen much of the girl, and I have studied her nature and character. Besides—she has a history."

"What is it?" I questioned eagerly.

"I am putting things together—memories of other times and scenes. Her face first made me wonder and puzzle over something that had happened long ago—something that she reminded me of. I have not quite got the clue yet."

"When you have, you will tell me, will you not?" I entreated.

"Yes—if you are still within reach of me; but we are

to be parted now, you know. I go to Tista, you remain with Delli."

"And perhaps we shall never see Daphne again," I murmured discontentedly.

"I fancy we shall," said the Amati. "The lives of these three are linked to our own future. See if I am not right."

In my velvet-lined case I lay alone, untouched, for long after this conversation. But I thought over it often. I wove a pleasant little romance, which was to terminate as brightly as a fairy tale. A romance in which Tista became a great and famous man, and Daphne shared his future, and rejoiced in his successes, and love made their lives rosette with eternal summer—a romance in which Delli ever smiled benignly on his youthful *protégés* as their benefactor, and in their happiness found his own.

Alas! how far, how fatally far, from the reality of after circumstances were my pretty idyllic fancies of that time.

When Daphne came for her last lesson, she played less skilfully and correctly than was her wont. Her heart was not in her work, that was plain. Delli seemed to notice it. He bade her put her violin down at last, and sing to him.

"I should like you to sing this," he said, handing her a MS. of his own.

The girl took it and glanced over the page.

"You know I cannot sing well at sight," she said.

"I know you can if you will only try," he answered, laughing. "It is very odd that, with a voice like yours, you prefer the drudgery of learning an instrument, when you could do so much yourself."

"I do not care for singing," she said gravely; "it is no effort—it seems childish—it costs so little."

"What a strange girl you are," he answered, looking earnestly at the beautiful young face that had so much more in it even now than its years seemed to warrant. "But come—try this to please me. I know you can sing it if you choose."

She took the music he gave her, and ran her eyes over the closely-written pages. He opened the piano and played a few bars, then gave the signal to begin. She might well have said singing was no effort. The most delicious notes floated through the room — clear, sweet, thrilling, not always correct perhaps, but lovely with an instinctive melody that seemed to spring from her as naturally as song from a lark or a nightingale.

When she had finished her master turned to her with delight.

"It was beautiful," he said. "Do you know what you sang?"

"No."

"It is part of my opera. I have been commissioned to write one for the Opera House in Florence. Do you like that song? It is the *prima donna's* chief aria."

"It is very lovely," she said simply; "I should like to sing music like that."

"And so you might if you would take my advice and study for the operatic stage. Three years would give you all the needful knowledge as to music. The dramatic part you could acquire in much less time. It is a fine career. I wish I could persuade you to embrace it."

"You are very kind," was the quiet answer; "but I cannot leave my grandfather. My first duty is to him."

"Your grandfather cannot live for ever," said Delli impatiently.

She looked at him in some surprise.

"Of course not; but while he does I shall never leave him. He has seen much trouble and is often sad. I am all he has."

"You are a good, dutiful girl," answered Delli contently.

"You are quite right, quite right. Only——"

"Only what?" she questioned, as he hesitated.

"Only the world will be a loser for your self-immolation on the altar of duty. But there, I suppose you are happy. It is best so."

"I am content," she said quietly; and to me it seemed

that contentment was the nearest approach to joy she could feel, or ever had felt.

"You are a strange girl," Delli said, looking intently at her from under his beautiful arched brows. "What will you be when you come to womanhood, I wonder?"

She smiled faintly.

"Like other women, I suppose."

Delli shook his head.

"Hardly possible," he said. "I can imagine no other woman quite like—you. But now I must send you away. This is our last lesson, and it is over. Are you sorry?"

"Yes," she answered, growing a little paler at the words, and looking away from his observant gaze, as if it discomposed her. "I shall miss coming here. I hope I may remember all you have taught me. You have been so kind."

"Kind?—nonsense," he said impatiently. "I have done nothing. I wish I could serve you more. But you cannot learn as Tista does, and you will not do as I wish. I cannot help regretting it. Perhaps some day you may change your mind. If so, here is the address of an excellent teacher, a friend of mine. He is accustomed to stage training. Keep it by you; it may be useful. And this card has my own address. If I leave Bologna I will write to you. I do not wish you to forget me, Daphne."

"I shall never do that," she answered quietly, meeting his eyes with one of those soft serious glances that were so unchildlike and so rare.

"I am glad to hear you say so," he told her softly, and then took and kissed the hand she held out with a grace peculiarly his own.

So they parted.

BOOK IV

ANDANTE AMOROSO

CHAPTER I.

THE AMATTI'S STORY.

How swiftly the time passed. Tista threw himself heart and soul into his studies, leaping from height to height, from difficulty to conquest, with a speed and a certainty that seemed to be marvellous.

He had a room in the house of some friends of Delli's—kind-hearted, simple people, both past middle-age, and devotedly fond of music; so the boy's incessant practising in no way discomposed them. The Signora Dini grew very fond of the lad. She was childless herself, and his gentle, courteous, dreamy ways had a singular attraction for her.

As for Tista himself, I might have thought him cold had I not seen that his whole nature was really concentrated on art, and art alone. He had no thought for idle amusements, pleasures, pastimes, because he lived always in a world of his own, full of idyllic fancies, impersonal desires, hearing ever—even amidst the clang of the hammers in the noisy Bologna streets, or the wrangling of copper-smiths and market folks—those same wonderful sounds which had haunted his childish brain in the workshop at Cremona.

For my part I liked Bologna far less than the prett

picturesque little town we had just left. Here all was so dark, and dim, and sombre. It was like plunging into the depths of the Middle Ages once more, and I had outlived them and was an ardent disciple of progress. As for Tista, it suited him marvellously. It coloured his dreams and crept into his music, giving it a strange depth and solemnity, a profound grandeur, a sublime pathos that it had lacked before.

Six years we were there, he and I, and during all that time we only saw Delli twice, and as each time he came without my friend the "Strad," I had no opportunity of exchanging confidences, or asking news of Daphne, or our acquaintances in Cremona. As for Delli himself, he was little changed. He had always been a handsome man, and the passage of the years was but lightly marked on the smooth broad brows, the glossy waving hair, the eyes that had the melancholy that Vandyck gives the eyes of Charles Stuart, and were so rarely brightened by any smile.

Yes, he was a handsome man, with a face that grew upon one the more one gazed, and yet left something vague and unsatisfactory in its impression.

Tista was very different. At eighteen he was a tall, slender youth, with all the soft grace of form and movement peculiar to his nation; with a singular power in his firm lips, his broad forehead, from which the dark brown hair was tossed in loose, rich waves. His eyes alone contradicted the firmness and decision of his other features; they were soft, large, and lustrous as a woman's eyes, full of dreams, and ever seeking something far removed from the earth in which he lived.

In all the years I had been with him his nature had scarcely changed; he was wonderfully innocent, wonderfully ignorant of most of the necessities, evils, coarseness, and temptations of life. Knowledge of the world he had none. I often wondered how we would meet it when the time came for him to face opposition, or win favour.

There had been a competition at the school of music Tista attended. A prize had been offered for the best written mass, and he had won it. There had been no shadow of doubt in the minds of the judges, and the prize had been given to him with such warm commendation and praise as might easily have turned a weak head with vanity. That it did not affect Tista's was due in a great measure to that curious dissatisfaction with his own efforts which he always felt. It seemed as if the standard of excellence he set himself were too exalted to attain. I remembered perfectly well many an outburst of despair over this very mass—many a moment of weakness, when his tears had rained over the open pages, and his brain throbbed with vain endeavours to seize and commit to the canons of art, and the decrees of musical science, those wild, lovely, passionate melodies that floated through his soul, and defied interpretation.

Nevertheless, he had gained a great triumph; and when the students escorted him home in the quiet starlight, and the laurel crown was on his brow, and sweet, gay voices serenaded him as he sat in his own quiet little chamber, some thrill of pride and pleasure seemed to move him, and his face flushed, and his young slender figure drew itself erect, and he looked to me there just as the Borghese Apollo looks in his youth, and grace, and triumph.

The next day Delli came.

"You have made a good beginning," he said to him. "I hope it augurs greater successes still. But you must rest now. You are far too pale and thin for health. Take a holiday; go home to Cremona. They will be proud of you now. Your scholarship will provide funds enough for a year. But you must not overwork; that would ruin your future. Take my advice; go home."

"Yes, I will," said Tista eagerly. "I should like to see them all once more. Six years is a long time; and yet how soon it seems to have gone! Yes; I shall be glad of rest for a little, and—to see Daphne again."

I noticed he hesitated a little over her name. Perhaps

his conscience rebuked him for long neglect of his old playmate. He had not written to her for three years at least; that I knew.

"Ah—Daphne!" said Francesco Delli musingly; "I wonder how she is, or what has chanced to her. She must be a woman now, Tista."

"A woman!" Tista laughed gaily. "Daphne a woman! I cannot fancy it at all."

"These six years will have changed her more than they have changed you," continued his companion. "And she was twelve years of age when you left."

"True," said Tista thoughtfully; "but it seems impossible to realize it. I always picture her just as I saw her last."

"I want you to come out with me this evening," said Delli presently. "I am going to Prince Marzello's house. They are very musical, and I should like you to play. Now that you have entered upon your career you must try for influential friends. That is the quickest and easiest road to success."

"How can that be?" asked Tista gravely. "When people have ears to hear and minds to think for themselves, can they not tell what has merit or beauty? Why do I need influence, if I seek fame?"

"Why?" echoed Delli bitterly. "Read the annals of all public lives, and you will scarcely need to ask that question. Read of the jealousies, animosities, malignity, intrigue, burdens, which beset their paths; read of the stones which strew their ways, and which they tread down with bleeding feet, and eyes still turned to a heartless crowd that follows its own false idols; read of the prayers in which the soul utters its vain longings, and over which hearts break, and life dies. Read all this, and then ask yourself if it is not wiser to ride rough-shod over the necks of the fools who rule art, and would make its followers their slaves, than implore and beseech their favour from the lower stand-point of poverty, obscurity, and—merit."

Tista looked at him in surprise.

"Will it be thus?" he asked timidly. "I am poor and obscure I know; as for merit, it seems to me I have so little."

Delli laughed.

"You are almost a child still, Tista," he said. "I fear the world is too rough a sea for a bark so frail. I do not want to discourage you; but I tell you plainly that a musician's life is one needing indomitable energy, untiring patience, and the strongest determination. We fare badly because we are utterly dependent on the tastes, wills, and sympathies of others. A poet may write a grand impassioned poem. However it scathes or jeers at the follies of mankind, however pitilessly it pelts their weaknesses or errors with its fiery bullets, yet still it will be read; it can make its own way. A painter may deal in like manner with his own fancies. There they are transcribed for all to see. His work stands alone; it needs no further aid to complete it. Let any one who pleases cavil at it, he can point to the canvas and say, 'Judge for yourself; where are the errors you sneer at, the imperfections at which you scoff?' The musician, however, is dependent on more than this. If he be a composer, not one of his creations can be heard without other aid. If he is an executant, he must have an audience. In the one case he must trust to others to interpret whatever of beauty, grandeur or difficulty lies in his music—and it may be as easily marred as not; in the other, he is limited to a few hearers perhaps, the half of whom care nothing about what they are listening to; the other half only criticise and sneer."

"And yet music is grand—so grand," murmured Tista. "I fancy sometimes I see myself playing—there is a vast crowd around—they are all silent, all still. The music speaks to them; gradually they forget that they are cold, careless, indifferent; that I am unknown, and weak, and poor. It breathes over all like a poet's words of fire, so that every heart is set aflame. Its magic wakens smiles or tears at will; it holds them breathless with awe, in-

toxicated with joy; it sways and bends them, as a storm-blast bends the forest trees; it bears them to a paradise glorious as one's dreams of Heaven. That, signor, is what I long to accomplish. Only once to stir their thoughts to a rapture like this; only once to move them as one man, to take them out of their colourless lives, and make them forgetful of all, everything save what they hear; to see criticism, coldness, contempt, listlessness, indifference, all fused into one glowing flame of feeling; only to see this once, I should be content to die!"

Delli looked up at him in a wonder that had something of awe.

The young artist was trembling like a leaf. His outburst of passionate eloquence left him shaking and pale as death—only in his eyes gleamed a light almost unearthly in its brilliance.

"Tista," said his companion gravely, "if you feel *thus*, almost I think you can defy the fate that has crushed so many a great and gifted nature. Almost I think so; and yet—"

"And yet?" questioned Tista faintly, as he drew his slender, girlish hand across his brow.

"And yet," continued Delli, sadly and regretfully, "what a price one would have to pay for such a conquest!"

CHAPTER II.

HE AND SHE.

Gliding o'er the silent waves by night,
Leaves the bark its tone of silver light;
Thus thy presence leaves its silver trace,
Gleaming in my life's dark ocean space."

MEISSNER.

THERE was a grand *festa* at the palace of Prince Marzello that night, and Delli and Tista went. I of course was taken also. Festivities were familiar things to me. I had seen so many of them, and they differed in very little from each other. The essential elements were always the same—jealousy, vanity, and pride.

I noted Tista carefully. It was his first entrance upon any gaiety of the kind, and its magnificence and display would, I thought, dazzle and surprise him. I was wrong. The boy looked at all with calm, serious eyes; a little impatient, it seemed to me, of the time he was wasting here; time that might be so much better spent in his quiet study at home.

There was one thing that I noted in him, and that was his utter freedom from anything like awkwardness or restraint. I remembered him a little barefooted lad in the old Cremona workshop. I saw him a tall, slender, handsome youth, with a native grace of movement, and an utter absence of self-consciousness that made him as much at home in a prince's palace, as on the hill sides, or garden nooks of his childhood's home.

It came to his turn to play at last. The prince himself asked him; and without a moment's hesitation, or sign of nervousness, he obeyed.

The rooms were thronged. Beautiful, high-born women, courtly men, lovely maidens—all were massed together into a dazzling, brilliant crowd; and there, amidst them all, standing on a small raised platform at the furthest end of the glittering *suite*, stood Tista.

A few eyes turned languidly towards him; but as he was unknown, as his appearance had not been heralded or spoken of in any way, he created little interest. They renewed their flirtations, discussions, intrigues, as the case might be; and few, if any, took note of the player—at first. Only at first, though. Ere two minutes passed, something—I know not what—some electric thrill of sympathy ran from player to audience. Voices dropped, eyes turned in his direction; a hush and silence fell upon them.

I have spoken so often of Tista's playing—what need to reiterate my praises? It seemed as if his wish had come true; as if the whole courtly, listless, high-bred throng assembled there forgot for a time the cares, sins, passions, follies of their time, and of their lives, and hung with mute wonder and rapture on the lovely strains they heard. And lovely they were. One pure, melodious, brilliant stream seemed to flow from that magic bow; it was as if his heart itself spoke and touched every other heart, to answer its passionate entreaties. I saw women's eyes grow dim, and men's faces grave I noted the bated breath, the dilated eyes, the awe, and wonder, and delight of the listening crowd before us, and my whole frame seemed to quiver and vibrate with intense feeling.

I was no more a lifeless block of wood, an inanimate senseless machine. The player's soul seemed to have passed into me, and his thoughts and feelings and desires to find an utterance at last.

As he finished, a strange sigh, that was almost a sob, shook the listening crowd as a wind may shake the forest leaves in some hot summer night. One simple impulse of ardour, one unstudied outburst of rapture, greeted him from every side. Almost it seemed to me as if his wish were

verified; as if the fame he had craved had come at his bidding in these first moments of success.

He was surrounded, complimented, praised. He had dreamed of triumph, and lo! it was at his feet. He was noticed and observed. I saw how his soft, shy grace of manner, his simple courtesy, his serious calm young face, with the dreaming eyes and poetic brow, were studied and regarded by many a woman's eyes; but he seemed as one in a happy dream, submitting to all homage with a graceful timidity, and a tranquil carelessness that blended strangely and harmoniously together.

It was growing late. He and Delli were standing together. The prince was beside them, talking to the latter.

"I expect another *débutante* to-night," he said; "a young singer. I have heard her voice is a marvel. I don't know whether report is correct. She has been studying at the training-school in M——, under the celebrated Signor Ferraro. I believe she will go on the stage. Ferraro says she must make her *début* at La Scala. He has great interest there, I know."

"How is Ferraro? I have not seen him for many years," said Delli.

"He is very well; ageing of course now. I wish he would come. But perhaps the journey has fatigued him."

"Why—there he is."

It was Delli who spoke. Tista turned in the same direction.

Advancing towards the platform was an old man with a grave, serious face, and white hair tossed in gleaming silver waves from his high forehead. His dark piercing eyes glanced restlessly from side to side, and leaning on his arm was a girl of singular beauty; tall, graceful, willowy; her feet seemed rather to float than to walk; her eyes were dark as night, soft and liquid and glowing, with full white lids and long sweeping lashes; her cheeks pale, with a clear creamy paleness that shows up every flush of colour, every trace of emotion. Her hair was

like the hair that sculptors give their goddesses, waving in lovely curling masses from her brow, and crowning her small, exquisitely-shaped head with a diadem of brightness, too dark for gold, and too fair for brown—a hue matchless and rare, and very beautiful, such as we see in the bronzed leaves of an autumn wood.

Murmuring a few hasty words of excuse, the prince hastened forward to welcome the new arrivals. Delli's eyes remained fixed on the girl's face; then turned, puzzled and wondering, to Tista's.

"Is she like any one you know?" he asked.

The boy's face grew radiant, his eyes smiled, his lips parted.

"It is Daphne," he said.

"Daphne?" echoed Delli; "are you sure?"

"Sure?" said Tista impatiently; "of course I am sure. Do I not know her well enough to remember?"

"But that she should be here, and under such protection?—introduced, too, by Ferraro—it is wonderful."

"It is her voice, I suppose," said Tista, musingly. "I always said it would make her famous."

"She might have written—have told us," murmured Delli. Tista glanced quickly at him.

"She might have told *me*. I was as her brother, but I suppose she forgot."

"True to her sex," murmured Delli; but his eyes rested long on the lovely face, and in them I saw a fire that they had never worn before in all the years I had known him.

Presently she sang.

All I have said of Tista's playing I could say of her voice. Greater praise I cannot give, and greater praise it does not need.

* * * * *

"Daphne, have you forgotten me?"

It was Tista who spoke. The girl was leaning against an open window overlooking a balcony filled with flowers.

The stars were shining, but the moon was gone—a pale tremulous light quivered over the sky—a strange radiance that the dawn would fire into fuller glory with the touch of its first kiss.

She turned and looked at him, amazed.

“Tista! you?” Then she gave him her hands.

“You are surprised? So was I when I saw you. Have you remembered me a little all this while, Daphne?”

“Of course I have,” she said, smiling up at him, for he was much taller than herself. “But you are very much changed, Tista.”

“And so are you, but yet I knew you at once. Daphne, why have you not written to me—told me about yourself, your life, your fortunes—for so long?”

“I might ask the same question, Tista. I thought you had forgotten me. You are getting famous; your hopes seem to be realised. And——”

“And what, Daphne?”

“I was going to say you were too great and exalted a personage to remember your old playfellow.”

“Nay, dear, you are cruel. I wrote to you last. You never answered me. Then I have been much occupied. I have had to study hard, to work unceasingly; but still I never forgot you, Daphne. Only to-day I was telling Delli I must go and see you. I thought to find you still in the old home. It is wonderful to find you here in the same city, following the same profession. And you are really going to be a singer, Daphne?”

“I am. What do you think of it?”

“I think you are quite right. You always seemed to me intended for one. Your voice is very beautiful.”

His eyes rested on her face as he spoke, and for an instant her own glance met his. A flush rose to the white transparent skin, the lids drooped over her lovely eyes.

“But not half so beautiful as you,” he went on. “Daphne, am I dreaming? It seems almost impossible to believe you are the little girl who sat with me in the old villa gardens, who listened to my music, who was so dear and true a sister.

And you have not forgotten me; not in all these years of silence that rise between our childhood and the present hour?"

"I never forgot you," she said softly.

He bent down and touched her hand with timid, tremulous fingers. His eyes had in them that look of awe and admiration which I used to see when he spoke of the angels whose music came to him in his innocent childhood. And yet, now, into the childlike awe crept a look of passionate rapture which never before had found a resting-place there. He trembled as he stood beside this girl; he seemed half pained, half glad, half fearful of the feeling that had come to him, while all the time the rose-boughs rustled, and the soft air touched his burning cheek, and the calm pale light of the stars lit up the pale exquisite beauty of the girl beside him, and rested on his own young ardent face.

For some moments they were silent. Then Daphne spoke.

"You are wondering, doubtless, how I came to be here. It is a long story, and sad."

"Do not tell it me now," he said softly. "It scarcely seems a time to talk of troubles and difficulties. Only one thing, Daphne, are you happy?"

"Very happy. I am always occupied. I work hard, almost as hard as you yourself do, Tista. But I like my profession."

"What made you think of adopting it?"

"It was after my grandfather died, and—but that belongs to the story, Tista."

"Then we will leave it for to-morrow. It is sufficient to-night to see you, and look at you, and hear your voice, and know you are safe and happy. Sometimes I have thought of you as troubled, and sad, and lonely, Daphne; and then I longed to go to you—but——"

"But the music came between, did it not? Do you know, Tista, in the years to come I almost pity the woman you will love. She must always be second to that one passion of your soul."

"I have never thought of—women, Daphne."

"Not yet. Well, you are very young."

"I am older than yourself."

"But at your age I am a woman, and you are only a boy, Tista."

"The pretty mischievous inflection of her voice seemed to trouble him. He raised his face and looked at her.

"A boy," he said. "I *was*, perhaps; but never after—to-night!"

"And why not? Have the sweets of fame intoxicated you? Have you reached manhood at one stride?"

"It is not fame that has intoxicated me, Daphne."

"No?" she went on with pretty unconsciousness. "What then?"

He half sighed.

"I will tell you one day."

"And why not now?"

"Perhaps you would not believe me?"

"I am not aware that incredulity is a special trait of my character."

"You have altered, Daphne. You never used to tease so in the old days."

"Perhaps in the old days you never gave me the opportunity."

"What a foolish boy I was then."

"Do you imagine you are so very much altered now?"

He coloured.

"I do not know. I never thought about it. I feel different. I suppose if you are changed, I am changed also?"

"You find me very much altered, then?"

"Yes; and yet I knew you at once."

"Marvellous!"

"It shows my memory is faithful, does it not? But you are very lovely, far lovelier than any other woman I have ever seen."

"Flatterer," she said, blushing and laughing as her eyes met his own in the soft gloom. "But you were always

half a poet, Tista. You saw beauty in things that other people thought mean and common."

"But it does not need a poet's eyes to see beauty in you, Daphne. You are a living picture as you stand there in the shadows, with those rose-boughs against your hair, that silvery light on your face."

"Tista, since when have you learnt to pay compliments?"

"Only to-night. You are my teacher. Oh, it is such happiness to see you once more, Daphne."

"And yet you have been very happy and contented all these years without me?"

"I did not know my old playmate and companion was transformed into——"

"Into what?"

"A goddess."

"You foolish Tista." But her eyes dropped, and she blushed softly in the shy sweet light that fell around them.

"Daphne, tell me one thing. Are you glad to see me again? Do you love me as in the days of old?"

"That would be telling you two things, Tista. But I *am* glad to see you again. Now, I shall tell you nothing more till to-morrow."

"I shall see you to-morrow, Daphne. I wonder how I have existed so long and not done so!"

"It is wonderful," she said demurely. "But, as I said before, my absence has made no material difference to you as far as I can see."

"It will now, I fear."

"Then I am sorry we have met again."

"I am not; but you must be an enchantress, Daphne. I feel no more like the same Tista who came here a few hours ago than that rose-light in the east is like the radiance of the stars.

She laughed.

"Tista, you are talking greater nonsense than ever you talked in the old garden beneath the magnolia-trees, and I am sure you taxed my patience severely then."

"You were always good to me, dear—far too good," he said humbly, "and I fear I trespassed on your kindness sadly; but you were the only one who seemed to understand me, who never mocked, or teased, or laughed at me. Should I find the same sympathy, I wonder—now?"

She was silent for a moment. Then suddenly she turned and looked at him. Only a glance, one glance; and the white lids and heavy lashes fell over the glorious eyes beneath.

"Always," she said softly.

CHAPTER III.

"THY HEART LIES OPEN UNTO ME."

"Now lies the Earth all Danaë to the stars,
And all thy heart lies open unto me."

The Princess.

It was evening, and the soft dusk filled Tista's little room—the room where he had laboured and worked, and dreamt those dreams that are so much to the dreamer, so little to the outer world.

He and Daphne sat there alone. She had come to see him, and to tell the story she had promised.

It was six years since they had parted, these two; and six years, at the age when childhood merges into youth, makes a great difference in the feelings and affections. Neither of them could take up life where they had left it, or resume the frank, unfettered intimacy they had known.

It seemed as if this thought came between them ever and again, causing a restraint in words and looks that once would have seemed impossible. Tista was younger in many ways than Daphne. He had been so utterly,

innocently happy, so far removed from any harsh, or rude, or troublesome intrusion in that world of fancy where he dwelt. The fret, the jars, the strifes and animosities of the outer world were things that he dimly recognised as existing, but which never troubled his own life. When he saw beauty he admired it just as he admired the changing hues of the mountains, the tints of stormy skies, the sweep of fresh wide waters, the treasures of art, the grandeurs of architecture. But when Daphne came before him again, fair as a young goddess, exquisite as a poet's dream, he had felt bewildered by the rush of strange emotions her presence created in his breast.

Having lost her so long, his memory had failed to follow her through the changes of the passing years. He had left her a child, he found her a woman. The change dawning suddenly upon him had not been so much of a shock in the crowd of the prince's room, amidst the dazzle and glitter of the *festa*, as it seemed to him when through the dark night hours he dwelt upon it in solitude, and felt his cheeks burn and his heart throb at the memory of her loveliness.

And she was beside him again now.

In her simple dress of purest white—with neither colour nor ornament save only the rich hues of her bronze hair, the soft rose-red of lips and cheek—she looked even more beautiful than she had done on the previous night. She came into his presence, startling him for a moment into utter silence, glorifying all the homely nature of his surroundings with a spell, whose nameless ecstasy held him dumb.

"Are you not glad to see me?" she asked, seating herself by the open window, and looking up at his pale, startled face with a smile dazzling as sunlight. "How strange you look. Have I disturbed you? Did you not expect me?"

"No—yes—I hardly know," he stammered.

"Sit down and talk as you used to do. You look just as if you had been dreaming, and suddenly awakened."

"I think I have," he said, smiling a little now, and colouring shyly like a girl, as he seated himself opposite her.

"I wanted to come," she went on a little hurriedly; "I have so much to tell. You see it has all been so strange, so sudden. Three years ago to be in the old garden with no thought save of the birds and the flowers, and the music in the church, and the old books that my grandfather gave me to read, and now——"

"Now a great lady, the star of a prince's assembly, Daphne."

"Oh, no," she said quickly; "not that, Tista. It was quite an unexpected thing that I should go there; but I made up my mind that I would be a singer, and after my grandfather died, and I was alone, the thought came into my mind of what the Signor Delli had once told me, and I wrote to Ferraro, and he bade me come; and with the little money Orgagna left I paid my way. And when he heard me, he said, 'Stay three years and I will make you perfect.' It seemed a good chance, and I stayed and studied very hard; and now he says he will try if he can get me an engagement at La Scala, only first I must have stage training. It was for that I came here."

"Why did you never tell me of all this, or of Orgagna's death?" asked Tista reproachfully.

"I often thought of doing so, but then again I wanted to give you a surprise. 'When I am quite perfect,' I said to myself, 'then I will tell him all.' And confess, Tista, that you were astonished when you heard me?"

"Indeed I was," he answered gravely; "I can hardly believe even now that you are the Daphne of old."

"But I am," she said, with the same soft, serious voice that used to characterize her in the days of which he spoke. "Just the same indeed, Tista; your old playmate and sister whom you used to love——"

"And love still," he said with trembling earnestness, as she hesitated.

"That is right. I did not think you would forget. I thought of you so often, and rejoiced in your triumphs so

gladly. I knew we would meet again, but when I saw you last night so changed, and——”

“And what, dear,” he asked eagerly as she hesitated.

“I—I hardly know,” she said, as if with an effort. “Only it seemed as if you were so far above me now, as if you had climbed a height too lofty for me to follow.”

“Daphne!” he cried, pained and bewildered by the sudden hopelessness of her tone.

“Ah, Tista, you do not understand—you never can. Even when I was a child, in the old times that look so far away now, I had no friends save you. I seemed to have nothing in common with those around me; every one looked upon me with a strange coldness and suspicion, so I thought; and the older I grew the more marked became these fancies. The mystery of my life, my loneliness, my want of sympathy with all the dull and sordid cares of those around me, grew and deepened, and made my isolation more complete; but it was not till my grandfather lay ill and on his death-bed that I learnt the full bitterness of my lot.”

“Dear Daphne, why speak of these things when it pains you?” cried Tista earnestly.

“Because it is some relief to speak at last,” she said with an effort at calmness. “I kept all to myself so long. Tista, do you know who I am?”

“No, Daphne, I never cared to know,” he answered simply.

“I am a noble’s daughter,” she said, not proudly, but with a strange, defiant humility. “He broke my mother’s heart; he left us to shame, and misery, and want; but she was his lawful wife, and I—his child.”

Tista was quite silent. The words seemed to stun him; they were so unexpected and so strange.

“Orgagna told me the story,” she resumed sadly. “My poor mother—how she suffered. She was his only child, and he loved her dearly. She fled from his roof with this Count. From time to time she wrote to her father, saying always she was happy and content. But at last the letters ceased. He heard no more, till one day he received a

summons from a stranger, desiring his presence at Rome. He went; he found her dying; she never knew him at all. He could learn nothing. The people with whom she lodged said she had come there one winter's night, with a child in her arms. She was very ill; she had but little money; no jewels, no papers, no clue as to who or what she was. Before she grew quite unconscious, she bade them send for her father, and they did so. The day after he came she died. He took me away with him. He never thought of tracing her husband, or seeking him. You know how unworldly and simple he is. I lived with him just as you saw, knowing nothing of parents or relations, save just himself. Then, when I was left alone, I knew I must do something for myself. You see I was not of the people, and I never could have been content with a humble life. Is it pride? I do not know; but I was always restless and dissatisfied. You will think very little of me, Tista, after such a confession; sometimes I think it would have been better if I had never known my history at all."

"Daphne! oh, Daphne!" for she was weeping bitterly; and, even in their childish days, Tista had never seen tears in those soft and serious eyes.

"Yes, dear, I am foolish, I know," she said, struggling with the weakness that overpowered her. "You see I have not spoken of this before to any one, and after to-night I do not wish to speak of it again. You see, Tista, it can be nothing to me who I am, since my father has never sought me. Perhaps——" and in the soft dusk the flush in her cheek deepened—"perhaps Orgagna was deceived; he was so simple and unworldly; and how can we tell that my mother was really and lawfully this noble's wife? The world is so wicked."

Tista sighed heavily. It seemed as if this history had made the distance between himself and his old playmate even wider than before. She heard the sigh; she stretched out both her hands to him in soft appeal.

"Tista," she said gently, "don't look so distressed; you are my only friend in all the world. No one save our two

selves knows of this, and from this hour I do not wish to speak of it again. It can make no difference between us—remember that. If I were the greatest lady in the land, I would still keep the warmest and truest affection of my heart for you.”

“Ah, Daphne, you say so out of kindness now; but little as I know of the world, I know the difference it would place between us if—if your father——”

“Do not speak of him,” she said impatiently, almost angrily; “I owe him nothing save my mother’s broken heart, my own unrecognised existence. And I have only told you all this because you had a right to know, and I always longed that you should know.”

“But we are not quite equal in the eyes of the world, Daphne, if—if this be true,” he stammered hesitatingly.

“Then we will believe it is *not* true,” she said softly, as in the tender gloom her eyes met and held his own in one long, dreamy glance of perfect trust and peace. “Could anything be good to my heart, Tista, that would make us other than we have been—all our lives?”

He was silent for a moment; a rapture too great for speech held him breathless as he met her gaze, and heard her words. She was his Daphné still; the sharer of his joys, the *confidante* of his hopes and expectations. He was but a young dreamer; and of life, and the shams and follies of life, he knew so little—yet.

“It shall be as you wish,” he said simply. “I could never forget you. I could never cease to love you; but, if ever you are great——”

She laughed a little bitterly.

“If I change *then*,” she said, “I shall never have been worth a thought of yours, Tista.”

And only the stars saw the glory in his face, and the passion waking in his glance, as he knelt at her feet and kissed her hands for answer.

CHAPTER IV.

A FIRST PASSION.

FROM that hour Tista was changed. I saw no longer the dreaming boy, the fanciful imaginative poet. I noted that his devotion to art grew fitful. It was intense, enthusiastic as ever; but it had passion, not repose; fame, not content.

For two or three weeks after that interview with Daphne ne met with a universality of praise and adulation that might well have turned any one's head. He was the hero of fashion; caressed, adored, sought after by the rich, the great, the noble. His playing and his music were the themes of the hour. Women petted him and made love to him in a harmless butterfly fashion, that fell off from his shy coldness as lightly as dew-drops from a flower's petals. He did not care for them. He seemed to wonder at their coquetries, their graceful enchantments; but he had no room for other emotions than the two which filled his soul, and waged perpetual jealous warfare now; his love for his art, and his love for Daphne.

He did love her, that I knew; and yet he himself was scarcely aware how much or how deeply. She was staying at Bologna for the purpose of having stage lessons, and he saw her constantly; and the more he saw her the more restless he became, the more his thoughts wandered from art to love.

Was I jealous of this new rival? I think I was—sometimes. I lay neglected on the table, or in my case while, in the drowsy noons, or sweet summer nights, he would wander away with her. I knew it was with her, for when he returned there would be long reveries, and deep sighs, and fitful murmurs, in which I ever heard her name. No other creature had ever seemed to care for

in all the years I had been with him, as he cared for her. She seemed to engross every thought of his heart; it was as if he had gathered all the passion and devotion that lay in his nature and poured it out on this one altar. Yet he suffered. Who that loves does not?

He was pained by doubts, tortured by fears, chilled and fevered alternately by jealousy and hope. And one thing I saw and knew long before he himself had made the discovery—Delli loved her also. I thought it from the first. I was sure of it now; sure of it when he lingered on from day to day in the dull old city; sure of it when chance brought us all together for some practice of concerted music, some new air of Tista's that was to be tried; and I could watch them all, and draw my own conclusions.

Of her feelings I could never be quite sure. She treated Tista with a pretty teasing cordiality that baffled all his attempts to woo her to graver or deeper feelings. She was capricious sometimes, especially so when Delli was present; and the fever and anxiety of Tista on these occasions were sad to see, and hard to restrain. Delli ignored them. To him Tista was a boy still, and I think he hardly noticed the change that had come over him of late. And yet it was apparent in many ways. In the increasing manliness that replaced the boyish shyness of old, in the gravity of his speech, in the passion that thrilled his music, and came to him spontaneously, so that the once calm, sweet, ethereal fancies were merged into melody more heart-stirring, beauty more sensuous.

"When my opera is finished," he said once, "will you ever play in it, Daphne?"

She smiled.

"If you think I am capable of doing justice to your music," she said.

"There is no one living to whom I would sooner entrust it."

"Not even Madame Florestan?" she asked, speaking of a famous *prima donna* who was then delighting the Italian public.

"No, not even Madame Florestan. How can you think so much of her, Daphne?"

"She is a perfect singer, is she not, Signor Delli?"

"She is a very wonderful one, I must allow; but she will have a dangerous rival one day in you."

"Do you mean it? I wish—oh, I wish you and Tista would not flatter, but tell me the plain, honest truth. I want to know if I really am fit to go on the stage—if my voice will carry me through the dreadful ordeal that awaits me."

"You surely never doubt it?" Delli said, with wonder.

"I do, often and often. And then I lose heart, and grow weary and discouraged. I am so afraid."

"Nay, that is foolish, dear," said Tista softly. "Your voice is beautiful. I have heard many, but none so fresh, so pure, so full of melody. Am I not right, Signor?"

"Quite right. She will know it soon. Her reign of triumph will begin next season."

"My reign of failure, perhaps."

"You should not allow such a possibility to enter your thoughts. No one could associate failure with you," Delli said softly.

"Are you going to sing this?" asked Tista suddenly. The tender inflection of Delli's voice had caught his attention, and seemed to disturb him.

"Yes, certainly," she said quickly, crossing over to his side, and taking the MS. from his hand. "Play the violin with me, Tista. I like it so much better than the piano."

Tista obeyed. He took me from my place, and played the opening bars of one of the loveliest melodies in his new opera. Delli withdrew to a corner of the room, and shaded his eyes with his hand, watching the singer from beneath that shade with a keen intent gaze, of which she was quite unconscious. The music seemed to stir the girl's soul. I noticed how her cheeks burned, how her eyes glowed, how the tender passionate words fell from her lips with a new and fervent meaning; and as I noted all, I, for the first time, hoped for Tista. Ere this I had feared she cared for him more as a brother than aught

else. To-night something of the meaning and inspiration of his own fancy kindled hers to like rapture, stirred her heart to like pain, and thrilled it with like joy.

She sang, and her soul was in the song, even as Tista's was in the music he played and had written. It was a love declaration, unspoken but felt. From that hour Tista was no longer to her the boy she had teased and coquetted with. He had touched her heart, and she recognised in him a power whose strength she acknowledged—a supremacy to which she yielded with scarce an effort at restraint.

I was pleased. I knew all would be right at last, and I had so dreaded she might love Delli.

When she ceased singing he dropped his head; his eyes gazed adoringly, passionately at her excited face, her exquisite beauty. A tumult of excited praises, of rapturous admiration, left his lips. She bowed silently, gracefully, in acknowledgment. Involuntarily her eyes sought Tista's; he did not speak a word. As she met his glance she read his secret. I saw her tremble, her breath came quick and fast, the colour swept like a burning wave over all the fair white beauty of her cheek and brow.

They were both silent. What need of language when looks were a thousandfold more eloquent?

In all the world, in all the history of life, in all the records of fancy, there is nothing so pure, so perfect, as the first, pure, perfect love of youth. In that glance heart spoke to heart, soul rushed to soul. And yet it was so short, so swift, so transient. Delli did not see it, only I; and to them I was only a silent, senseless piece of wood. Yet it was to me they owed the rapture of this moment. Had I not breathed to her his passionate longings? Had I not carried to her his first love message? But they did not know?

Ah well; all lovers are egotists more or less.

CHAPTER V.

OLD MEMORIES.

“Of all the arts beneath the heaven
That man has found or God has given,
None draws the soul so sweet away
As music’s melting mystic lay,
Slight emblem of the bliss above,
It soothes the spirit all to love !”

HOGG.

AFTER Daphne had left, Tista and Delli sat for long together, each busy with his own thoughts.

Delli was smoking by the open window ; Tista playing softly from time to time, as if the melodies were accompaniments to his dreamy fancies.

Delli turned to him at last.

“Have you seen much of your old playfellow since she has been in Bologna?” he asked.

“Not so very much,” said Tista, colouring a little in his shy, boyish way. “She is so occupied now.”

“Ferraro is very proud of her,” continued Delli absently. “He prophesies that a great future lies before her. It appears she is to stay in Bologna all the winter ; he wants her to have stage training, and the Signor Tezza, who is an old friend of his, and has herself borne off high lyric honours in her day, is to prepare her. What are your plans, Tista? Do you intend coming to Florence with me?”

Tista hesitated a moment.

“I think not—at least not at present,” he said, reluctantly. “You see I have still a great deal to study, and my prize money will support me for a few months—until my opera is finished, at least. I like the quiet of Bologna. Florence is so gay ; it might distract me.”

“I do not think there is very much quiet here,” Delli

said drily. "The clang of the coppersmiths' hammers, the din from the workshops, the clatter of the bells, the noise of the people; why, from morning to night there is tumult incessantly."

"I do not hear it," answered Tista, "and when I go out it is almost night; the streets are sombre and desolate enough then, the workshops are closed, there is an intense stillness everywhere—in the dark arches, the vaulted footways, the deserted courts. I like the gloom, the melancholy. And there is so much of history here; every piece of stone and marble, every dusky archway, wears still the spell of its old-world enchantment; one lives again in the ages of Bentivoglio; one forgets the folly and affectation of modern life. It is a place for dreams; it holds in its memories of the past all the possibilities of greatness for the future——"

"What a boy you are still, Tista," said Delli, half impatiently; "when will you have done with dreams and fancies?"

"Never—while I live in Italy," said Tista enthusiastically; "is it not essentially a land for them? On the summer days, when I feel idle, I leave the grim old city, and go out through the gates into the country beyond. You know it, signor, well enough. How can I forget to dream when I have such scenes around me? I lie on some green hill-side, where one can see the great plains, the white cities, the line of circling mountains, all hyacinth-hued beneath the sunlight. Only to lie and look at it all, and know one lives—it is happiness enough."

"You should have been a poet, Tista; you talk like one. I wonder what you will do when your dream days are over, when you are face to face with sober facts and stern duties. I once had fancies like yourself. How long ago it seems—now!"

They were silent; only Tista looked at his friend's face with a sudden interest and longing in his own.

"You are still young," he said, "and yet you talk so bitterly of life and all it brings! I often wonder why."

"I dare say you do."

"Delli's voice was hoarse and low; a strange passion stirred it.

"Don't waken old memories, my boy," he said sternly; "they are hell-hounds, that bay one on to madness. There is one thing I envy you even more than your youth, Tista; that is your innocence. You are eighteen; at your age—well, I will not pollute your ears by telling you what I was; everything that you are *not*. Great Heaven, in what vice I had been steeped! what lessons I had learnt! And you? Tista, you have not even dreamt of love I verily believe."

The warm blood leaped to the boy's face; he stooped over and touched my strings with trembling fingers. Delli did not seem to notice his silence. He leant his folded arms against the window-sill; his tall handsome figure stood out in bold relief against the clear moonlit sky. His face looked very white; his thoughts were far back with those past years of which he had spoken.

"I envy you," he went on dreamily, "because in you I see all the possibilities of a great future, all the purity of an unsullied manhood. No shame, no sin pollutes the one, or shadows the other. And I; why, only to blot out *one* year in my life, I would yield up every honour I hold, every homage I accept, every possibility of greatness I have now, or seek to win!"

"Are you then unhappy, signor?"

"Unhappy!" echoed Delli bitterly. "I do not remember having ever tasted happiness in all my life. I believe it is a chimera of a poet's brain, a fancy for childhood; even in my youth I never knew it. Is it possible—now?"

Some tender inflection of his voice, some shadow of softness in his face, made Tista look at him more earnestly.

"Has not your fame brought you happiness?" he asked.

Delli laughed scornfully.

"The howls of a pack of savage calumniators, the praises of a unit in the world's millions; the fulsome flatteries of fools who fear, or parasites who copy! *That* is what fame

has been to me; I scarcely think it merits the name of happiness. The fault may lie at my own door; as one is, one is. I may have no capacity for enjoyment, no taste for the pure, even calm that seems to you so divine a thing; that rocks your fancy to slumber, and seals your senses to a lower range of pleasures."

A sorrowful tenderness came into the boy's earnest eyes. He laid me down and crossed the room to Delli's-side.

"Do not speak so bitterly," he said; "perhaps your happiness is to come. It must be terrible to live all one's days, and miss it. But you are so good and kind. I am sure——"

Delli touched his lips lightly with his hand.

"Che-e-e, I am nothing of the kind," he said, laughing; "I am only a soured, disappointed man, who envies others what he himself has missed. I am not even a good friend for you to possess, Tista—if you did but believe it."

"But I do not."

"No, my boy, you have a romantic and irrational fancy for me—not knowing that I am a passionate, cynical, vindictive man; loving few, hating many, of my fellow-mortals; dissatisfied with myself and my life; wanting, I scarce know what, and deserving—nothing."

"You do yourself injustice, signor," said Tista, warmly; "you are not what you describe, indeed."

"I have known myself for forty years; you, Tista, have known me some six. Is it likely I am mistaken?"

He moved away impatiently, and shook off Tista's detaining hand almost roughly.

"It is late; I must go," he said; "and to-morrow I start for Florence. This will be *addio*, Tista."

"Shall I not see you again?"

"Not unless you come to me. You have forsaken me of late, allured by the charms of Bologna; or is it—Daphne?"

"Daphne?" said Tista, laughing and colouring; "she is like my sister, you know."

Delli's lip curled a little scornfully.

"A pleasant enough relationship; the only drawback

is, it is not likely to last. But to hold anything by the tenure of insecurity is a charm in itself, especially if it be a woman. Once more, *addio*; don't work too hard, and don't dream too much."

Then he left us.

Tista paced restlessly up and down the room.

"How strange he was to-night," he murmured; "and why does he leave so suddenly and soon. I could not go; somehow I feel I must stay with Daphne. It is so long since I have seen her; I could not leave her so soon. Why is it that I think so much of her now? Once it was always my music, now it is always Daphne. She is so beautiful; she is like Giulietta, when Romeo saw her in the moonlit balcony at Verona. Giulietta——" he paused, smiling softly to himself, as Romeo might have smiled over the memory of his granted rose. Then he took a well-worn Italian Shakespeare from the table, and sat down to read it.

His face glowed as he studied the passionate, exquisite words. Restlessly he moved from his seat and resumed his walk, while the brilliant moonlight flooded all the room, and the scents of the summer night floated through the open casement.

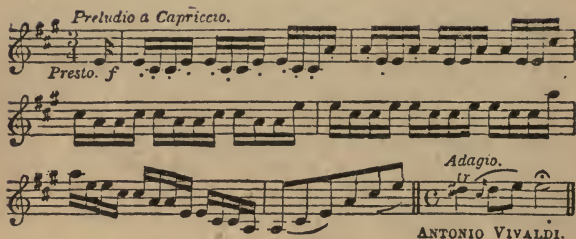
"I love her," he whispered softly as he leaned out and let the cold wind stir his curls, and felt its kisses on his burning face. "But not as a sister. Oh, Daphne, my queen, my joy!"

* * * *

I wondered no longer that he would not go to Florence

CHAPTER VI.

"OUR DAY."



FOR some days Tista scarcely saw Daphne. Perhaps she avoided him purposely. I thought so often, remembering that glance which had betrayed so much, and the shyness and restraint of her manner afterwards.

To me it was a pretty idyl, this love of theirs. Tista was very timid—very fearful of angering or offending her. I think it placed him at a disadvantage; your bold wooer has always the best chance. But a frown or a cold look from Daphne now seemed to give him absolute torture, and would bring him down to a state of misery and dejection that would have angered me had I been human.

Why did he not speak to her? I wondered; but I knew he was fearful of offending her altogether, and not at all confident that her sisterly regard for him was in any way changed as yet.

The summer days passed on. Sometimes in the evening she would come and try over his opera with him; but always accompanied by Signor Tezza, who was the strictest of duennas, and never allowed them to digress from the object of the visit.

One evening, however, the music was drier than usual. Daphne had resumed her violin practice, and she and Tista were trying over some duets. The old lady, lulled by the warmth and soothed by the music, fell back with closed eyes in her chair, and her placid breathing soon gave token of slumber. Tista came a few steps nearer to Daphne.

"Why have you avoided me so of late?" he asked reproachfully.

"Have I done so?" she asked innocently.

"You know you have. I hope I have not offended you, Daphne?"

"Is this in the music, Tista?"

"I never had a chance of speaking to you alone. You are always engaged, or surrounded. Sometimes I feel I would give my life almost to have one day alone with you in the old garden, as we used to do."

"How foolish. You must place very little value on your life."

"But an inestimable value on—you, Daphne."

She was silent. The touch of her hand on the strings grew less sure; her face flushed soft beneath his glance.

"Would it be quite impossible for us to have a ramble together once more?" he asked gently. "I should like to show you some of my favourite walks, and the country around is beautiful."

"I dare say Signora Tezza would come, if I asked her."

"But I do not want the signora; I only want *you*. Promise you will come, Daphne," he added imploringly.

"I cannot promise. I am not my own mistress."

"But will you not ask the signora? It is such a little thing, Daphne; you would have done much more for me once."

"I will ask certainly, if you wish it. I don't suppose she will allow me to go with you though, unaccompanied. Why are you so specially desirous of her absence, Tista?"

"You are so different when we are together, rare as that is, Daphne. Do you know you are quite different as

a woman to anything I have ever imagined. You were so solemn, so calm, so grave when you were a child; now——”

“What am I now?” she said, smiling.

“Of course you are perfect, even in your cruelty; you are enchanting in any mood but you are not my Daphne, as I dreamt of you, and thought to find you again.”

She flushed hotly.

“You are disappointed, then, in me?” she asked presently.

Tista looked at her; he saw the quiver of her lips, the blush on her cheek; the sight filled his heart with unwonted boldness.

“As disappointed as Romeo was in Giulietta—Yes.”

“You are talking nonsense, Tista, and neglecting my lesson. Oh, see! a string has broken.”

She handed him her violin, keeping her eyes bent down on it, as if conscious how ardently his own glance rested on her face. He took the instrument from her, and as the touch of her soft fingers met his own, a sudden passion fired him. He caught her slender hands in both of his, and bent and kissed them.

“Daphne, Daphne,” he said, “all that Giulietta was to Romeo, you are to me.”

She caught her hands from his grasp. A flood of crimson rushed over all the whiteness of her face. Then she moved hurriedly away from his side. He thought she was angered—offended. I knew better. I knew that his words had stirred her heart from its slumbers—awakened in her the fever of unrest that had come to him; that she was afraid of herself at last.

A soft, strange, troubled look came into her eyes. They drooped before his own. Oh, foolish young lover, who knew so little of women! who could not read these signs aright!

“Why are you not playing?” asked the old signora, rubbing her eyes, and waking suddenly from her evening nap.

"My string has broken," said Daphne; "and, besides, it grows late, dear signora. Had we not better be going home?"

"Yes, certainly, if you have had enough of music."

"I will accompany you," said Tista, approaching them.

"Nay; it needs not," said the old lady kindly, "such a little distance, and the night so clear and bright. We will not trouble you so much, signor."

"I have not been out all day," he answered her. "Do not refuse me the pleasure of your company a little longer, signora."

And she smiled, well pleased at his persistence, for Tista was a great favourite of hers. So I saw them all leave and go out together into the quiet dusky streets, which, for two at least of the little party, held untold beauty.

* * * * *

"I am so happy—so happy," cried Tista rapturously some few days later; "it seems hardly possible to believe; and yet here is her note—her words."

"DEAR TISTA,

"I have got my holi 'ay. The signora is going away for two days. Choose which you prefer. To-morrow is a feast day. Perhaps that would be best.

"DAPHNE."

"Best? Oh, dear Amati, why can you not share my joys. Sometimes I wonder if you know how I love her. You play as if you did. You shall come with us. It will be like the old days again. We will loiter on the hill-side and rest under the cool green boughs, and I will play to her what I dare not tell in words. A day—a whole long summer day—together! Nay, it seems a joy scarce credible!"

So he went on. A thousand rhapsodies were poured out to me. A thousand ideas, fancies, idyls, was I called

upon to interpret. He seemed beside himself with joy at one moment. The next he would be full of tears, dread, despondency.

"She does not love me—not as I love her," so he said a hundred times over, until I grew weary of the words and of his laments.

When the morning came, he was up at sunrise. It seemed a marvel that any human being could be so restless and so perturbed as he was, and—for a girl's sake! Well, it seemed foolish to me.

He was true to his word. He put me in the little travelling-case he had, and then, when the day was yet young—the sunshine bright without heat, the wind blowing from the sea, with a cool, salt, pungent odour in its breath—he set out.

Daphne was ready waiting for him. Her shyness and coldness seemed all gone. They were replaced by a coquetry and archness that were irresistibly fascinating—that fenced her round as its circlet of thorns may fence a rose.

"Is it not good to have gained our holiday, after all?" she asked him merrily. "The dear old signora's cousin, or sister—I forget which—is ill, and sent for her to nurse her. She was in sad perplexity about leaving me; but I told her I would only see you, and as she looks upon you as my brother almost, she at last forgot her scruples and went."

"We will be brother and sister once more, Daphne, for to-day, just to please the—signora."

"Will it not please you, Tista?"

"Or you, Daphne?"

"Me? Of course. I only bargain for one thing. We will not be serious. We will wander, and laugh, and sing, and chatter, and enjoy the air and sunshine, and the flowers, as though we were children once more."

"You shall do whatever you please, my Giulietta."

"Why do you call me that?" she said, blushing.

"Because the name suits you so well. You are just as

fair, just as enchanting as the Veronese Giulietta must have been when Romeo's eyes fell upon her face. They were very young lovers, Daphne."

"Were they?" she said, with a pretty affectation of unconsciousness. "Are you very fond of the story, Tista, that you are always reading or speaking of it? To me it is so intensely sad."

"I love sad things best, Daphne. Yes; I never weary of reading that pathetic tragedy. After all, perhaps it was better they should die young and together, than live to be old and see troubles and cares crowding around their passionate fancies, stealing her loveliness, ageing his youth, dimming the glory of their sweet love-dream. At least they had one hour of joy so exquisite that any other must have looked pale and dull beside it."

"What romantic fancies you have, Tista!"

"Have you outlived yours?"

"Some of them, I think. I have had much trouble. I have seen much sorrow. I cannot get away from and beyond realities as you do, Tista, and yet you seem happy."

"I am not happy, Daphne. Often I am very, very sad and miserable."

"Why?"

"Do you care to hear?"

"Certainly I do. Are you not my brother still?"

"No brother, and no friend either, Daphne, if I tell you what is in my heart."

"Do not tell me then," she said lightly. "It would be a pity to spoil our holiday so soon."

"It would spoil it then, you think?"

"Tista, you are not keeping your promise. Our conversation is serious."

But though she spoke lightly, her voice was not so frank and cordial as before.

"You have set me a hard task, Daphne; nevertheless I will try to obey you. See, we are out of the town now. Is this not beautiful?"

They paused a moment and looked round. They were

on the wide white road leading to the shrine of the Madonna de St. Lucca. On every side were fields and plains, stretching like a sea-green ocean, and orchards of olives and mulberries, and vines with young grapes nestling under their full leaves. Behind them lay the great grim city, with the morning sunlight rising warm and golden on all its countless roofs, and towers and spires.

"Is it not beautiful?" he asked again.

Daphne sighed.

"Yes," she said.

"What is it? There is some thought that saddens you, Daphne."

"I was thinking of Properzia di Rossi. Perhaps she has stood here and gazed on this very scene—her heart sad even amidst her triumphs; the laurels bitter as death on her pale young brow. Was ever any life at once so great and sad as hers, I wonder?"

"Any woman's life, you mean?" said Tista gently. "Do you remember what Delli said about your name, Daphne? The laurels that crown a woman's brow press like thorns upon its beauty."

"Why should not fame be as sweet to women as to men?" she asked a little impatiently, as they turned away and moved on together up the sloping hill-side.

"Because women's natures are different, I suppose. They have a softness, a tenderness, a depth of passion, which need other answer than the homage of a multitude; which leaves them cold and lonely, even amidst their hours of triumph. Was not such Properzia's fate? Compare her with the Veronese Guilietta. Who was the happiest? The woman who had the sovereignty of genius and the homage of a whole city, or the girl who had but the homage of one man?"

"You think, then, that love is all in all to a woman. How do you come to know so much of their nature, Tista?"

"I know nothing of any living woman, Daphne, save you!"

"And judge the whole sex from one. How foolish!"

Besides, you do not know me as I really am—only as what you imagine me. I am not like Properzia at all. Fame like hers would content me entirely.”

“And an empty heart, and a love unreturned, Daphne?”

“I think the one could easily be filled. The other—is it likely to be my fate, Tista?”

“Not while men have eyes to see and hearts to worship you!” he said passionately. “For heaven has made you so beautiful, that to know you must either be a man’s misery or joy.”

“Men are not so susceptible, Tista,” she said, blushing softly beneath the passion of his gaze and voice. “You have not seen half the beautiful women in the world or you would not rank me so highly.”

“I have seen *you*,” he said softly; “no other living woman can seem to me so fair.”

“What a nice brother you are, Tista, to say such things! But then you are a poet at heart, like most Italians. Romeo himself could not rival you at flattery.”

“Are you not my Giulietta? Have I not told you so again and again. As for poetry, it is not only—poetry—that speaks from my heart when I look at you, Daphne.”

“Are you going to be foolish again,” she said, laughing, and then ran lightly away from his side amidst the cool green grass, and tossed flowers at him, and teased and jested with him in a pretty, wilful, provoking way, altogether new to her—a way which left him no choice but to follow it, and seem as gay and light-hearted as herself.

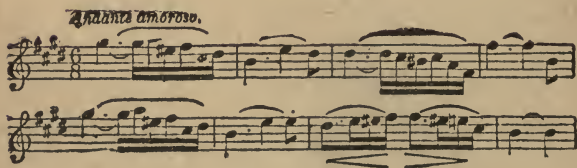
They gathered the flowers and sat under the ilex-trees, and laughed and chatted and sang songs, and played snatches of melody on me from time to time, and spent such a day as one can only spend in Italy under the cloudless sky, beneath the blessed sunshine; with a thorough immunity from observation or remark, though many a group of idlers, like themselves, passed them from time to time, and the piping of a flute, or twangling of a mandoline, mingled with the merry voices and laughter of maidens and youths, all holiday-making in the reckless,

mirthful fashion, that is so peculiar to the Italian *popolani*.

Tista and Daphne visited the shrine, and paid their obeisance to the Madonna, and laid wreaths of roses and lilies on her altar. They wandered off again, and made their noonday meal at a *poderi* under the shade of a great mulberry-tree, covered all over with purple fruit. How happy and contented they seemed. How swiftly the hours sped, till the sun began to sink slowly behind the crest of the Apennines; and Daphne, watching it, sighed softly, "Our day is over."

CHAPTER VII.

CONFESSED.



THE bells were pealing from the city as they turned homewards. Over all the sky was that soft dim violet-blue, that is so lovely and so mystical, and that one sees nowhere save in the skies of Italy.

They went slowly and silently along in the delicate light, moving like figures in a dream, with thoughts from whence all the gaiety and mirth of the past few hours seemed banished. The hour was in harmony with them—soft, subdued, tremulous with faint whispers from rustling boughs and swaying grasses, and amorous with sighs of breezes, and sweetness of flowers they had kissed.

They paused beside a stream, flowing like a thread of silver through a thicket of canes and reeds—a tiny, bubbling, laughing thing—where shadows fell from the maple boughs, and wild roses grew in a tangled thicket, and a carpet of thick green moss stretched around invitingly.

“You are tired?” said Tista softly; “sit down here, and we will watch the moon rise.”

She obeyed silently; sitting down on the soft sward with a Titania’s grace, the lovely wavering light playing over her lustrous uncovered hair, her exquisite face.

He leaned against the tree above, surveying her for some moments in silence. Then he began to play—not any music she had ever before heard—not any music such as had ever left my strings at the bidding of any mortal—a weird, mournful melody, that had all the despair of death, all the longings of love, all the abandonment of passion. It was as if his whole soul had let itself loose at last in a flood of music, such as he could never pen—such as she had never listened to.

She moved restlessly. Her eyes avoided his. The colour flushed her cheeks. A sigh burst from her parted lips. It was not in human nature—certainly not in hers—to hear such music unmoved. It fired her whole soul, and for one moment she lost her self-command.

Her glorious eyes, dark as night, bright as starshine, looked up at the face of the player. He met the gaze, His hands trembled. He laid me down, and threw himself at her feet.

A moment he paused, looking at her with an adoration so intense, a love so passionate, that she could not meet his eyes. Her hands lay clasped in her lap. He took them in his own. His burning lips touched them.

“My Giulietta?”

“My—Romeo.”

That was all.

Above the line of trees rose the clear pale silver of the moon. Great burning stars throbbed in the pale sapphire

of the sky, the wind rustled the rose thickets, and scattered the fragrant petals at their feet. Leaf and shade fell over them in friendly gloom. His arms closed round her; with one long passionate sigh their lips met—at last.

Thus they entered into the Paradise of Love.

* * * * *

I lay there neglected, forgotten. Well, I had done my duty. I had carried his message to her. I was not needed now.

Little by little their trance of silence was broken by faint words, by timid whispers.

"Do you love me, Daphne? Really? It seems incredible."

"I love you."

"My beautiful! Your words make my heart ache with rapture. Such joy is almost too much to bear. You have not loved me always, Daphne. You have been very cruel sometimes. Do you know how I have suffered for those cold words and looks of late?"

Silence.

"Are you sorry, *carissima*?"

"Yes," she said softly.

"Will you make amends for your cruelty? Tell me, when did you discover you loved me?"

"Do you not know?"

"Was it—that—night, Daphne?"

"We have met so many nights, Tista which is the special one you mean?"

"Do you remember the look you gave me—a look that nearly made me forget all prudence, all restraint, even the presence of the good signora, was it then, dear one?"

"I—I think so."

"My angel."

"No, Tista—no angel—only a very commonplace faulty mortal."

"Who has turned the world into Paradise for me?"

"I never thought you would love me, Tista. I thought you were exalted far above all such weakness—shall I call it so? I thought you would live only in and for your art. You will be great one day, my Romeo."

"And only value that greatness for your sake, Giulietta. Will it make me dearer in your eyes?"

She looked at him. How beautiful she was. Any man might have found his happiness in such love and loveliness as shone in her face then.

"It cannot," she said softly and shyly.

The words seemed to intoxicate him with joy. He drew her arms about his neck, and rested his lips on hers, murmuring such words of love and passion as only live in Tasso's own sweet tongue. Each looked in the other's eyes, and saw an Eden of delight, exhaustless and unbounded as the raptures of love seem in the eyes of youth; an Eden they had entered at a look, a touch, a word; an Eden where no serpent dwelt, no poisoned fruit could gleam.

They rose at last, and stood under the heavy shadows, while above shone the moonlight in the lustre of the sky. The stream ran murmuring on; the roses closed their petals on the falling dew. She rested silently against his heart. There was utter silence now. What need for any words, since all of language could hold no sweeter or more blissful utterance than the two already spoken—"I love."

* * * * *

They were glad with the gladness that never comes twice to any heart. Their souls echoed to the music that only sounds once in every human life. All of happiness that life could hold was gathered and garnered into that one most exquisite hour.

They moved slowly away at last, her hand on his arm; his head bent down to the lovely girlish face that **paled** and flushed beneath his passionate glances.

They moved away—silent, engrossed, and full of happiness.

But in the dewy grasses I lay where he had left me. I had sung his love-song, to her ears—had seen her spirit answer to the call of his own. And my reward was—forgetfulness.

BOOK V.

CHAPTER I.

THE STRAD'S STORY.

“Oh, brother, the gods were good to you,
Sleep and be glad while the world endures.”
The Triumph of Time

I AM very fond of Florence.

Of course you smile, saying with the self-arrogance of mortals, “How can a bit of wood and four strings be fond of anything?” Nevertheless, we bits of wood that interpret your music and give it life and speech are full of sensibility and feeling, believe it or not, as you please.

We know the touch of an artist from the bungling of an amateur; we sympathise with the wild flights of genius; we answer the call of soul to soul, and shrink from rough usage, or extremes of temperature; our organisation is delicate and keen; serve us well, and we repay you amply; neglect or ill-use us, and the life within is dulled and weakened, the fulness and richness of tone is gone!

But to resume. I love Florence best of all Italian cities, dear as they all are to us, for is not Italy peculiarly our birthplace? Does not she claim the merit of first producing us, and prove her claims more effectually than any other nation? Have not writers and historians deservedly acknowledged that she nourished and cherished us in our very first stage of existence, and that to her belongs the credit of our after-growth and fuller development? These facts are incontrovertible, and we know them to be so.

Delli brought me with him to Florence as I before stated, and we settled down there in one of those villas amongst the hills that are so quiet and picturesque; from thence he could reach the city at will, or shut out all its sounds and all its beauty, and dream away his days in thoughts of melody, or that soft sensuous idleness which seems peculiar to Italians, and makes them content with so little, because that little is to them—enough.

In the half wild, luxuriant gardens, he would sit for hours together, his table and papers and books of reference by his side, under the cool green arching boughs. On the grass at his feet was my case, usually open, and from time to time he would draw me forth, and play over the melodies he was composing, or the fugitive thoughts that the scene and the hour inspired.

Delli was what is called a successful artist; successful so far that he had no need to trouble himself about engagements, seeing he had often more offered than he could possibly accept; and as far as his compositions were concerned, they were bought up as soon as written. But he was always dissatisfied. I alone knew why. In everything he did, and everything he wrote, there was just that tiny something wanting, without which the most perfect playing or writing is disappointing; that little spark of divine fire which gives to the simplest creation of genius a spell of its own—a beauty that all hearts can feel even in their ignorance; a power to which greatness bows even its pride and self-sufficiency.

He was peculiarly sensitive to external beauty or effect, and hence the reason of his choice of residence.

It is said that the great Haydn could never compose save in court dress, and with a diamond ring on his finger. In like manner Delli, while I knew him, could never compose save everything soothing and pleasing to the eye surrounded him.

He loved to sit there, in his dusky, quiet gardens, where he could see the towers of the city rise through the mist of olive-trees below; where the distant pine-woods looked

like cool blue shadows, so far away and dim they were, and the white snows of the towering Alps lay like a gleam of silver, shining against the pale sweet blue of the summer sky.

One day we were in the gardens together, he and I.

He had but recently returned from Bologna, and returned, it seemed to me, moody, depressed, and ill at ease.

Why, I was at a loss to imagine.

On this day, however, he seemed even more restless than usual. His pen was taken up and laid down twenty times in an hour; the snatches of airs he played were wild and inharmonious.

At last he put me away and pushed back the table so roughly that half the sheets lay scattered among the flower-filled grasses.

"It is of no use," he said, "no use. Do what I can I think of nothing but her. Turn where I may I see always her face. What has come to me?"

I—lying there under the ilex shade, with the wind scattering fruit blossoms ever and anon over my strings—I heard him and wondered.

Who was the woman he spoke of? Some one he had met in Bologna? I thought it must be so, seeing that only since his short visit there had he been so changed. Only to-day, of all the days and months and years I had lived with him, had I heard him mention a woman's name with a sigh.

"It is folly, utter folly," he said presently; "she is a child in comparison to me. A child, and yet with all a woman's beauty, and all a woman's grace of speech, and look, and action. Have I lived so long, to fall at the feet of a girl in a slavery as bitter as its hopelessness. And yet, why should it be hopeless?" he added, springing suddenly to his feet and pacing to and fro under the hanging boughs. "Why? Am I not as worthy of love as a dreaming boy? He has the world before him. I—I have outlived all that makes life sweet—its dreams, its hopes, its pleasures! Shall I stay my hand now, when at last the cup of bliss is extended to me? stay it, too, merely

from a foolish sense of honour, a dread of coming between those two who have lapsed from the fancies of childhood into the vague illusive joys of youth. Why should I not try to win this prize for myself? Why?"

I listened lying there at his feet, and as I heard, I understood.

He had met Daphne again. She and Tista were the boy and girl of whom he spoke. She it was who had fired his heart with this strange, fierce, sudden passion. She, the pretty, grave-eyed child, whom last I had seen in the old music-room at Cremona. I saw it all now clearly.

And all the time Delli moved restlessly to and fro, his music neglected, his engagements forgotten. His whole soul engrossed but by one thought—the thought of this girl whose name I could guess so well, even though his lips never uttered it.

The hot, sweet, drowsy hours slipped by. The afternoon passed, and still he lingered there. The sun set, and the coolness of evening floated over the quiet gardens, and the spires of the city gleamed more faintly through the clouds of olive foliage. A man came up through the shady walks and greeted him laughingly.

"Is it thus you work, my friend?"

Delli glanced up with a faint smile.

"Is it you, Gillino?" he said. "Sit down; you are welcome."

"And how progresses the opera; will it be ready for me next season?"

"Oh yes," said Delli, indifferently. "Have you come to inquire about it?"

"No; to tell you the truth I am in great perplexity. One of my singers, who was to appear next month, has broken her engagement through illness; it will be quite impossible for her to sing at all. I wish to replace her, but all the best singers are engaged. These English *impresarios* thin our ranks of recruits considerably. In my dilemma I thought I would come to you. Is there any one you know who could take the part in Rossini's operas?"

You know the kind of voice we want for that florid music?"

Delli started. His face flushed, his voice grew tremulous as he answered,

"I know a singer who would just suit you. Her voice is exquisite. She knows all Rossini's music too. The only drawback is stage training. She is perfecting that at present, but she has never appeared on the boards yet."

"Do you think she could undertake such a part? I should require her as *prima donna*."

"I am sure she could," said Delli eagerly.

"And would she come? Where does she reside now?"

"At Bologna."

And I, lying there, knew whom he meant.

"I will do my best to persuade her," continued Delli. "She has had good teaching, and I know is singularly gifted and intelligent."

"How old is she?"

"About eighteen or nineteen."

"Well, I will take your recommendation, Delli. I know its worth, and am not afraid of being disappointed. And you are busy as usual," he added, glancing round at the scattered sheets on the table—the open case on the grass. "Ah, what it is to be famous."

"Do you call me famous?" asked Delli bitterly.

"Decidedly you are. I wish I had as many laurels as you have now."

"They are all withered, Gillino. I care nothing for them."

"You were always strange, Delli. What is it that you seek? Something very hard to find, since all you have gained does not content you."

"My fame will not outlive my life, Gillino. Perhaps that is the cause of my regret."

"Absurd; what makes you say so?"

"Inward conviction. I do not deserve what I have gained, and my laurels are only paper ones, *amico*. I have a fame, it is true; but what is that after all?—a wind's

breath that stirs men's wonder, and dies away where none can follow, or secure it."

"Yet most men are glad enough even for the faintest stir of such a breeze among the leaves of their tree of life, Delli."

"Perhaps I am not like most men; in any case I know my own weakness thoroughly."

"*Che diamini!* How you talk, one would think you either the most discontented man that ever lived, or the most unfortunate."

"I am certainly the first: in my own mind I sometimes fancy myself the last also."

"Prosperity has spoiled you, then."

"Perhaps it has. I should have been buffeted, not caressed? scorned, not cajoled; flouted, not favoured. I might have been a worse man, but I should certainly have been a better artist."

"Che—e—e," laughed his friend merrily. "You wrong yourself, Delli. The world has called you great; why tell the world it is mistaken? Besides, your music is really beautiful, and you play—when you like—as only a true artist could play."

"Your flattery is worse than the world's, Gillino. Did not a wise man say, 'Preserve me from my friends.'"

"Why do you persist in depreciating yourself so much, Delli? Is it affectation of cynicism, or real humility?"

"Neither one nor the other, *amico mio*; simply and entirely, I do not believe in myself, that is all."

"But other people believe in you."

"So much the worse for—the other people," he said, laughing lightly. "And now to return to the subject that brought you here. Shall I write to my young *protegee* and see if she is willing to come?"

"By all means. She is a *protegee* of yours, then, Delli? How many you have! How is that young violinist, by-the-bye? I heard wonderful accounts of his playing at Bologna."

"He is wonderfully gifted," said Delli coldly. "There

is not much to fear for him. He will make his way in the world, I doubt not."

"Thanks to you. How many struggling artists you have helped to fame and fortune, Delli. There is one virtue I feel inclined to envy you—it is your utter freedom from the vices of jealousy, or envy."

Delli's face grew suddenly dark; he laughed, but his laugh was harsh and constrained.

"There is one gift I envy you, Gillino," he said, as he waved his hand towards the table, on which a servant was setting out fruit and wines and confectionery.

"What is that?" asked his friend, as they seated themselves, and poured out the cool iced wines into glasses of Venetian crystal.

"Your utter inability to read character," was the reply.

CHAPTER II.

"AS A FLOWER OR FLAME."

"Oh, God, that love were as a flower of flame,
That life were as the naming of a name,
That death were not more pitiful than desire,
That these things were not one thing and the same."

Laus Veneris.
SWINBURNE.

FOR six long years I had not seen Daphne.

Six years; and that space of time had transformed her into glorious womanhood. She must be beautiful, that I knew from Delli's words; but something more than mere personal beauty would have been needed to fascinate and enthral him so utterly, for he was used to loveliness, and also to every fascination that woman could exercise. Yet I had noted he was singularly cold—almost to indifference

—in their society; and his courtesy was too scrupulously polite to please, too uniformly the same to raise any notion of preference among the many who would gladly have claimed his allegiance for themselves.

But now? Well, I had not lived with men so long without reading the signs of emotions that thrilled, or passions that actuated them; and I knew that the strongest of all earth's passions, the most subtle of all emotions, had for once enthralled this man, and mocked his efforts at resistance.

When his friend had left him that night, he was strangely restless and ill at ease. I knew he was thinking of his new project—the plan that would bring her within sight and reach of him so soon.

"Will she come?" I heard him murmur again and again; and a light like happiness gleamed in his dark grave face—a sweetness as of music sounded in his voice. "If she do, there will be a time to remember. Florence will be perfect at last! It cannot be that she loves this boy," he went on presently. "They are as brother and sister; besides, at her age a girl always looks for a man older than herself. He is too young to chain a spirit like hers. Gay as she sometimes is, there is an element of gravity and thoughtfulness in her that claims a higher recognition, that yearns for a master, not an equal. Oh! to win her love, what would I not give?"

"It is the old madness," I thought, lying idly there in my velvet-lined case. "How will it end for him—or her?"

Happily I did not know then.

* * * * *

Ere the month was a week older she came.

I suppose the offer was too good to refuse. In any case, for whatever reason, she had made up her mind to come to Florence. I heard Delli say he would take rooms for her and the old signora, who was her companion;

and he and Gillino arranged about instruction and rehearsals and on Delli's face was a new radiance, and an eager longing, that each day intensified the more!

I wished he would take me with him. I wanted to see her again. I thought, too, I might hear of Tista—little Tista, who was now earning a name and reputation in Bologna; but who, it seemed to me, could never be other than the little dreamy barefooted lad I had seen in the workshop at Cremona.

One day my wish was at last fulfilled. She came to rehearse some music with Delli, and asked him if he still possessed me.

"Most certainly," he answered. "I should not lightly part with an instrument so valuable."

"May I see it again?" she asked.

Delli took me out of my case directly, and placed me in her hands.

This Daphne? She was changed almost beyond recognition, and oh, how beautiful!

"Do you care to play?" asked Delli presently.

She smiled.

"I will be your pupil once more, *maestro*," she said gaily. "Come, give me a lesson as you used to do in the days of old, if it is not troubling you, that is to say."

"You know it is not."

Something in the intense earnestness of his voice made her look up. As she met his eyes, a troubled look came over her face. For a moment they were both silent.

"Do you know," she said presently, "that Tista has lost the Amati that you gave him?"

Her head was turned a little away. He did not see the sudden flush that rose to her cheek at the words.

He started, and looked displeased.

"Lost it? How? It was a very valuable instrument. He should have taken better care of it."

"He is in great distress about it," she said hesitatingly. "He knows he can never replace its loss. He feared you would be very angry when you heard of it."

"I am indeed. I valued that violin very highly. How did the foolish boy lose it? It seems incomprehensible to me?"

Again the warm colour flushed her face. The hand that held me trembled exceedingly.

"You know his fancy for playing out of doors," she said. "Well, one evening we were out together. It was a feast-day at Bologna, and we were making holiday with others. He had been playing to me, and afterwards laid the violin down on the grass. How it happened that neither of us thought of it I cannot imagine, but when we reached home we remembered. Tista went back at once and searched, but it was of no use. Some one must have found it, and taken it away."

The story was simple enough. What was there in her manner of telling it that made it seem so much more than it was? Delli's face changed. He bit his lips. He asked no more questions about the Amati.

The lesson progressed very silently. Both master and pupil seemed absent and thoughtful. They played a duet together for two violins, which Delli had composed.

"Do you like it?" he asked as she finished; "what is your opinion?"

"I like it very much; but——"

He turned suddenly on her.

"You have never given me a word of praise, without a 'but' to qualify it," he said, with an anger in his voice and eyes that startled her. "Is Tista alone worthy of your approval?"

The girl looked at him in surprise; her colour rose.

"Your pardon, *maestro*," she said quietly. "I thought you asked for my opinion."

The reproach of her voice, the surprise in her face, moved him to a penitence quick as his wrath.

"Forgive me, Daphne," he said humbly; "I was wrong. But oh! child, there is nothing you can say of me that I do not deserve; and it is that knowledge which makes your depreciation doubly bitter."

"It is presumptuous in me to criticise your works," she said gently; "you who are so learned, and great, and famous. I only felt that there was a *want* in this. I cannot explain what—but doubtless it is my ignorance."

"It is *not*," he said fiercely. "You are not ignorant. You are right in what you say. There is a want—the same want that I have felt all my life, and never can supply."

She looked wonderingly at his troubled face.

"Are you not happy?" she asked gently.

Her voice—her look—unmanned him. He threw himself before her with a cry that had all of woe and despair and entreaty a heart could hold.

"Happy? no; for I love you! Night and day—morn and noon you are before me, with me, filling me with a passion of unrest—a longing that is madness. Oh, Daphne! Daphne!"

It was such a call as one might hear from lips that echoed the name of some loved thing dead and lost to them. Such a cry of passion, beseechment, despair, as never had I heard from human lips. His hands clasped the folds of her dress. His eyes looked up to hers; but in her bewilderment, her repugnance, her wrath, he read his doom.

For an instant surprise held her motionless. Then sense and feeling returned, and she wrested herself from his arms with sudden anger.

"Are you mad?" she said.

He rose and looked at her. His face was quite bloodless. His eyes told a tale that no woman's eyes could read unmoved.

"I am sorry," she said, more gently; "but your words alarmed me. You cannot surely mean them. Do you not know——?"

"Know what?" he said hoarsely.

"That I am betrothed to Tista."

"Ah no—no!" he said brokenly. "You cannot love *him*?—a boy, a child almost! You do not love him with

a woman's love; only as a sister loves a brother—as friend loves friend.”

Over her face came a flush and radiance beautiful to see.

“He is all the world to me,” she said softly, and her eyes drooped as if with some sweet shame.

A groan burst from his lips. That happiness, that joy, were too palpable; he could not deceive himself any longer.

“Daphne,” he said, “Tista’s love is a boy’s love—a thing wild, exciting; swift to come, but swift also to go. It cannot be on him that you have wasted all the treasures of your heart. His love, compared with mine, will be as the snowflower in the sun. Think you I do not know the soulless fancies, the mindless vagaries of youth. The first passer by who is fair to see, claims all for the time; another as fair will claim the same in a week, a month, a year. Oh! *gioja mia*, listen to me. I love you with a love beside which Tista’s cannot stand. I love you as a man only loves when his best years have gone by, proving the vanity, and sinfulness, and follies of life, yet leaving his heart untouched, till the *one* woman of all the world shall win it to herself and so winning, keep it evermore.”

“Oh, hush!” she said, trembling and turning away; “your words only pain me; indeed, indeed, I have no love to give you. I have thought of Tista, and cared for him, ever since we were children. I shall love him all my life.”

“You think so now.”

“I am sure of it.”

He turned suddenly away—a look upon his face as though he had received a death blow.

“My God! how shall I bear my life?” he cried.

Her face paled, her eyes were filled with tears.

“I am so grieved,” she faltered, in strange, unsteady accents. “I never thought——”

“You never thought!” he interrupted fiercely. “No; what woman does? You are true to your sex. Men’s hearts are your playthings; toys, to be broken and thrown away at will. Go! Your face maddens me. Go, and

laugh at your boy-lover over the fool whose life is at your mercy now!"

She burst into sudden tears.

"How cruel you are!" she said; "what have I done to deserve such words? Tista and I reverence you as only we could reverence a great and good man. To me you always seemed something far above us—something great and exalted. How could I suppose you would think of me as you do? I, a poor, half-educated girl, who only the other day was friendless and unprotected, and, but for you, destitute!"

"If you care for me a little," he said, coming to her side once more, "might it not be possible that in time to come you would care more? I could wait—I could be so patient. My love for you makes me humble as a child."

She drew back from him with sudden fear.

"You forget," she said simply, "I love Tista."

He stood quite erect. All the glow and fervour of passion left his face; only his eyes gleamed with a fury and hatred that his outward calmness belied.

"*Curse him,*" he said below his breath. "Was it for this I rescued him from poverty and oblivion?—that he might stand in my path, and rob my life of all its sweetness? Oh, fool! fool! to meddle with fate!"

And with no other look or word he left her.

She stood there, shaking like a leaf, her face cold, colourless, pained.

"Is it my fault?" she whispered in stifled accents. "The saints forgive me. I never thought of winning love or tenderness from him."

Then, with trembling limbs, and eyes from which all joy and peace seemed fled, she passed from the room.

CHAPTER III.

LITTLE—OR NOT AT ALL.

“If you loved me ever so little,
I could bear the bonds that gall,
I could dream the bonds were brittle;
You do not love me at all!”

Satia de Sanguine.

THE sweet summer days went by, and I was left to solitude and neglect.

Delli seemed to spend his time in roaming about the country. He did nothing—neither ate, drank, slept, nor worked, as far as I could judge. A fever of unrest possessed him. A conflict between his best and worst passions waged ceaseless warfare in his breast.

One night he came home late; his face pale and haggard; his eyes bloodshot and fierce; the picturesque noble beauty of his features all marred, as if by the riot and excesses of many an orgie in whose indulgence he had sought for forgetfulness.

He threw himself back on his cushioned seat, and called for wine, of which he drank repeatedly.

“Faust served Mephisto for his Gretchen,” he said suddenly, as if uttering unconsciously the thoughts within his own heart. “Why is there no Mephisto here to tempt me to a similar bargain? By all the powers of hell he should not need to ask me twice.”

Then I knew that the evil in him had conquered the good; and, knowing it, I trembled for the future.

He sat for a long time silent, but his face grew dark and evil as I had never seen it. Suddenly he rose and pushed aside the table with a violence that made the goblets and glasses ring again.

“All I have done I can undo,” he said fiercely. “Have

I lived all these years to be baffled by a boy—a dreaming baby, whose thoughts are for ever with things apart from earth and all belonging to it? Let her see him crushed by failure, intimidated by opposition, mocked at by a world that enthrones *me*, and then?—well, even if *that* fails, there are still means to lure him—to deceive her. Ere a year has fled she shall be mine. I swear it, though a hundred lovers barred me from her presence, or her heart—not one only!”

Then he drew writing materials towards him, and for long hours sat there penning letter after letter, of what purport I could not tell, save that from his words I dreaded the worst.

I have lived long in the world. I have seen true love and false. I have seen a love whose devotion and fidelity could teach it to *renounce* that which it coveted most dearly; and I have seen a love leap over obstacles and barriers innumerable, counting the cost of no sin, so that *attainment* were possible at the end. Alas, the one was of the soul, and, like the soul, tried by fire and purified by such trial, meeting its reward in some brighter, happier future than earth possesses; the other was of the senses, and lived its short delirium out, to wake at last to shame, and discontent, and satiety.

I knew to which class Delli's love belonged. It was a fierce, headstrong, impulsive passion, fanned to hotter flame by the girl's pure and noble constancy, her innate purity of soul, her exquisite beauty, her graceful genius. He had seen no woman like her, and he resolved to win her. But one obstacle stood in his way—Tista.

It was an obstacle he would suffer to oppose him long. That I saw now. Ere morning broke, dim and silvery and fair over the quiet world—ere the first bright sun-rays stole through the villa casements—he had completed a bargain terrible as that of Faust himself, and, like the German philosopher, he recked not the price he was to pay for it.

He sealed a letter, and then replaced it among the others.

“She will read that, and she will forgive,” he said softly

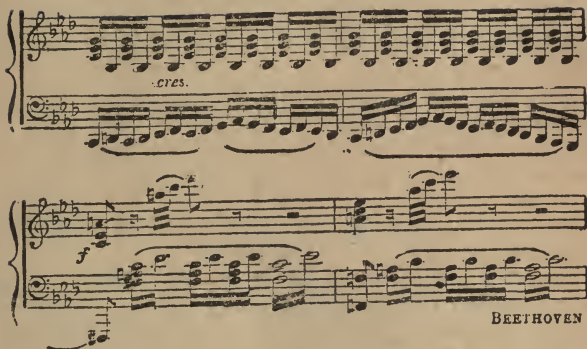
"She is but a woman, and a woman too young and innocent to know that the friendship of a man whose love has been rejected is a thing wholly delusive and impossible. I shall see her again. I can be patient and wait. and *they* are now separated."

And with a smile upon his lips, as of a triumph he foresaw, he went to seek his couch at last.

BOOK VI.

CHAPTER I.

THE AMATI'S STORY

Temppestoso!

I LAY on the grass for long.

Suddenly steps approached—slow, languid, as if weighted by age or fatigue. They paused beside the stream; then I saw a woman standing beside me, poorly dressed, but with face that must once have been very beautiful. Her eyes were fixed on the water; she did not see me.

“What a fairy-like place!” she said, in a half-foreign accent that proved she was no Italian. “A place for lovers to babble of their foolish passion, to breathe vows of constancy they never mean to keep!”

A laugh, sorrowful and bitter as her voice, left her lips. She moved away. In doing so, her foot caught in me. She stooped down, and picked me up.

"A violin!" she said in surprise. "What a strange place to be in!"

In the dim light she turned me round and round, examining me on every side.

"I wonder if the bow is here too. Yes, there it lies. What could the player have been thinking of, to go away and leave his instrument behind?"

Then she placed me under her shawl, and left the spot.

"More adventures," I thought; "if only she was anything but—a woman."

The long, weary road to Bologna was traversed silently and slowly. I knew when we entered the gates; but nothing could I see of where I was taken, or whither my new possessor went.

She reached her home at last, and sighed wearily as she sank down upon a seat. Then, after resting for a few moments, she lit a small oil lamp, and placing it on the table, proceeded to examine it.

"An Amati!" she cried suddenly, and forthwith let me fall from her hands, and burst into wild agonised weeping.

"Now, if women are not the most illogical and incomprehensible of beings!" sighed my poor trembling strings, while my whole delicate, sensitive frame quivered and vibrated with the sudden shock it had received. "She ought to be delighted at such a discovery, and she cries in this heartrending manner."

When the paroxysm had passed, she took me up again.

"How foolish I am!" she said. "To think that all these years have passed, and I cannot forget. Truly fidelity is madness in a woman."

She had removed her bonnet. She was of noble stature, with a face of Southern colour and Southern passion; a face no longer young, framed in by jet black hair, coiled round a head exquisite in shape and contour. Her dress

was mean and shabby; the room she occupied a mere attic, yet scrupulously clean, and decked here and there with bright field flowers, and wild grasses, as if she had sought to give some colour to its bareness and desolation.

Yet in spite of her own poor attire and her humble abode, she looked and moved like a queen; but her face was worn and very sad, and her large, beautiful eyes had a look I had never seen in any woman's eyes—a look as of some haunting, terrible memory from which escape was impossible.

Presently she laid me aside, and went to some work of copying music sheets which lay piled up on a table under the window. She sighed often over the weary task, and now and then a tear dropped from her eyes and blotted the page over which she bent.

At last she pushed her work aside, and once more turned to me.

“So long ago,” she murmured, “and yet it seems but yesterday. If I could only forget, as he has forgotten! I look down on this toy, and its sight and touch bring back all my youth—my dreams, my hopes. Where have they drifted now?”

Then with a sob, unspeakably desolate in the desolation around, she put me away in a chest, sweet with scents of lavender and dried rose-leaves, and left me to solitude and darkness once more.

“Poor Tista, how he will grieve to-morrow,” I thought; “he will never hear of me again, I am sure;” and there I lay, helpless and powerless, with the fragrance of the withered flowers around me, and on every side the gloom as of eternal night.

For many weeks I lay in my coffin (for so I considered it), the silence around me never broken, the gloom that imprisoned me never disturbed. One evening, however, the lid was raised, a sudden flood of light illuminated the darkness; then I was taken up, and found myself once more in the same room. The woman who had found me was bending over her work at the little window; a young

girl held me in her hands and turned me about, while rapturous exclamations broke from her lips.

"It is an Amati, a genuine Amati, dear signora; and you found it, you say. Why, what luck!"

"It is very useless to me," answered the sad, sweet voice of the woman. "I have made many inquiries as to the owner, but have failed to find one. Strange, was it not, to leave a valuable instrument like that lying forgotten on the grass. If it had been a lute, now, I would not have wondered so much; but a violin?"

"Yes; that is different. What a pity you cannot discover to whom it belongs! May I try it?"

"Certainly, my child."

The girl took the bow, turned me, and then began to play. The woman left off her copying work, and leaning her head on her hand, listened intently.

"Go on," she said brokenly, as the music ceased.

The girl looked at the averted face; her voice had a sound as of tears in its tremulous pathos.

"Does it please you, dear signora?" she asked gently.

The woman only bent her head; she did not answer. The girl played on and on, while the last faint reflection of sunset gleamed in the sky—a tiny patch of blue and rose colour visible from the little window on which the listener's eyes were fixed.

As the last rays died away the little room grew very dark; the figure at the lattice looked shadowy and indistinct; the fragrance of the fading flowers threw a faint, sickly odour around; the music grew softer and fainter, then ceased.

The player looked anxiously at the silent woman; it seemed as if in some vague way she knew she had touched a chord of memory in this stricken life, and was fearful of the consequences.

"Have I pained you, dear signora?" she asked timidly, as she came and knelt beside her.

The woman threw her arms round the girl, and leaning her head on the warm young bosom, burst into tears.

"Oh, child, child!" she said, "you bring me back my past. For six years I have lived here, unknown of any, cared for by none; working hard at a labour I hate, and working, as so many men and women do, to preserve a life that is valueless, and whose only existence is pain. Do you remember when I saw you first, Nita?"

"Oh, yes!" The girl raised her head and looked fondly at the beautiful troubled face. "It was the night I first sang in the opera. How proud I was of it, too, though I was only a chorus singer, and had such hard work and scant pay. And I came to lodge here, and then it was I met you on the stairs, as I ran up singing the music that was still in my ears, and you spoke so kindly, dear signora, and praised my voice, and since then——"

"Since then you have looked upon me as a friend. Is it not so, Nita? You have given me your full confidence; you have not deceived me in anything."

"As the saints hear me, no," cried the girl impetuously.

"And you have been tried and tempted, and resisted all, because——"

"Because I remembered your counsel and your warning, dear signora: 'Let the present intoxicate as it may, there is always the *future*.'"

"True, child; if more women thought of that, there might be less crime, less shame, less suffering. The future! Ah, God! there need be no other purgatory than to live on and on through its dreary desolate years—just to remember, and repent, and regret."

"You talk so sadly, dear signora. Have you no comfort, no hope of brighter or happier days?"

"None."

"You look still young, and you are so beautiful! It is sad to see you condemn yourself to a life like this," the girl murmured pityingly.

The woman laughed bitterly.

"I do not condemn myself to it," she said; "it is fate; and fate to a woman's life means one or two things—a love that is false, or a love that is true."

"Could any love be false to you?"

"Yes; I do not suffer alone; there are many others whose lives have been wrecked as utterly—betrayed as basely. Would you like to hear my story? What tempts me to tell it you? To no other living creature have my lips been opened on the subject of my life, my sufferings. I do not know how it is, but to-night——" she paused; her voice grew softer and more tremulous. "To-night, your music has unsealed the fountain of my tears, and softened the memory of my wrongs."

She paused a moment, then spoke hurriedly on.

"I am of Spanish descent, but my mother was of this land. She was a beautiful woman—gifted, accomplished, proud. I was her only child. From my earliest youth I had a passion for the stage; at ten years of age I could recite; at twelve I could act; at sixteen, regardless of all advice and opposition, I ran away from home and secured an engagement at a theatre in Paris. I told no one; I was a young, hot-headed, impulsive girl, fired with longing, full of ambition; eager for the triumphs I knew I had the power to win, and expecting to find the life of an actress a scene of endless intoxication and delight. Alas! I was soon awakened. I found myself in a hotbed of vice and immorality. I saw that to presume to be virtuous was a crime that not only those of my own profession, but the very public on whose caprices I depended for support, would resent to the uttermost. I grew alarmed. I merely had subordinate parts to play, but the manager promised me the chief *role* on certain conditions. He knew I had talent; but he knew, too, that I was young, friendless, beautiful. I had one special admirer—a French marquis, whose devotion was unaltered by any rebuff—undeterred by any coldness. Day after day did I return his presents, his jewelled bouquets, his passionate missives. At last he offered me marriage. I thought of it for long. I had no love for him and no regard, but I was friendless and persecuted. I had alienated myself from my parents, and for safety and

protection, more than anything else, I accepted him. We were married. He was thirty years older than myself; he had all the knowledge of the world that I had not; he gambled, betted, raced; had all the fashionable vices and not a vestige of honour or principle to redeem them. Imagine what my life was. He forced me back to the stage, and spent all I made. I wrote to my parents. They said I had chosen my own path in life; I must walk in it alone henceforward. I was but seventeen, then (the baby Marquise they called me), and launched upon French society as a popular actress and a young wife. I had thought to find safety in a wedding-ring—in the mere fact of possessing a husband's name and protection. Alas! what did I discover? Temptations were redoubled. On all sides I was beset. My youth, my innocence, my marriage, seemed but so many more inducements to men to persecute me. My own sex, too, were among my bitterest assailants. 'What did I expect?' they asked; 'if I chose that life I must conform to its necessities like other people.' Still I resisted; the only result being that I became unpopular, and a strong cabal formed against me for the express purpose of writing me down. One evening I went to a concert. I was passionately fond of music, and it was the one form of amusement in which I indulged every leisure hour I possessed. An Italian violinist was to appear—a man young and of great genius, so the world said—and Paris was eager to hear him. I sat in the front row of stalls, in the concert-room. My husband was not with me. I listened to the player till I seemed to forget my troubles, my sorrows—where I was, and who were around me. His music was exquisite. At its conclusion I glanced up and met his eyes. Mine were dim with tears I could not withhold. He withdrew, but I was in a tumult of agitation. I could not forget him, nor indeed did I wish to do so. After the concert I was introduced to him. From that time we saw each other constantly. He was often at my house. He was the rage in Paris for that season, and his music was the theme of

universal praise. Well, I must not dwell upon this longer. It was the old, old story of a love that was sweeter for its very danger—of lives that met too late. One day—one memorable day—we found out whither we were drifting; my eyes were open to the pitfall before me. I stopped on the brink in terror. He was a man. I suppose it was not in his nature to leave me with his love unspoken, his desires unurged. I refused to fly with him. He accused me of being selfish—selfish! oh, God! when my whole soul, my whole being, held but one longing—the longing to be his for evermore. I could have given up the world, celebrity, fame, riches, all for his sake, and laughed at the thought of sacrifice, but I paused a moment. I thought of—*him*. I had seen much of the evil of life, the sins of the world. I knew that to a man gifted, great—with a public profession and a life open to all men's gaze—such a step as he proposed would be ruin. He did not know why I refused—not then; but a year passed—a year that opened my eyes to my own position—that saw me deserted by my husband, forsaken by friends, persecuted by a *clique* furious at my success: and indignant at the pride which held me aloof from base *amours* and questionable friendships. In this state—heart-sick, lonely, wretched, worn out with struggles—I met him again. Before his gaze, his words, his entreaties, my strength failed at last. Everything that man could do to win me he did. Everything that love could urge he urged. Had marriage been possible, he would have wedded me. But in France it was not possible. Only this he swore, by everything he held sacred, that if ever I were free, that moment I should become his wife. I believed him. Alas! what does not a woman believe when she loves! I was wrong; I do not excuse myself; but oh, how I have suffered.”

Her voice broke; a storm of sobs shook her. The girl kneeling at her feet was weeping too. Outside in the misty sky the moon had risen, and poured its soft, bright beams over the two women in that quiet chamber. For long, deep silence reigned.

“To a woman who loves as I loved,” she at last resumed, “her passion is holy and pure, let the world say what it will. For a year I was happy—perfectly and entirely happy. Then—ah, then the awakening came! How is it that to men constancy is only a virtue that palls on sense and spirit—that the women most faithful are always the soonest forsaken? God knows!—I do not; only I have seen it a thousand times; only in my own sufferings I read this one truth, ‘To the faithless only are men faithful.’ I loved him, and he knew it; he was my world, my life, my idol. I dreamt no more of greatness or of fame—I lived for him alone—he was my law. To me all he did seemed right; I never questioned his will once I had yielded to it. But at last the awakening came.”

“He had left me for a day—we were in Rome—and the hours hung heavily on my hands. I never went out without him; it was his wish.

“I employed myself in arranging his music and decorating his chamber with flowers; he never liked any one to touch it but myself, that I knew. In placing some heavy music-books on a shelf a paper fell at my feet—it was half a sheet from some Parisian journal that had evidently been torn off. I glanced at it carelessly enough—two lines caught my eye and held me chained to the spot; only two lines—they chronicled the death of my husband at Nice, after a short and severe illness.

“I glanced at the date; the paper was a month old!

“How long I stood there I do not know. I seemed to grow years older in that one moment of shame and agony. For a whole month had this paper been in my lover’s possession; a whole month had he known of my freedom and yet no word had he spoken—no sign had he given—that he would fulfil his promise. The hours passed on. I did nothing; only sat there silent, passionless, cold as death, waiting but for his presence; telling myself, with love’s pitiful blindness to all treachery, that he would explain all—that it would be all right soon. I would not think—I dared not. I only went over my love and his—

my love and his. With evening he returned. I heard his step; he sought me everywhere; still I did not move. I waited there till he should come, that fragment of paper in my hand, that fear I dared not breathe, chilling my heart as with ice. He found me there. Something—I know not what—in my attitude or look, must have warned him of what I had discovered. His face paled, his brow darkened with anger. I rose to my feet; I handed him the paper.

“Did you know——?” I said simply.

“Yes,” he answered.

“That was all. But it was enough. I knew my doom. I knew that he had wearied of the tie that bound us, and I was too proud to ask him to cement its closeness by a ceremony that could never make me his wife in heart. How did I know it? you ask. Ah, child, a woman must be blind indeed when she cannot see whether love is forced or free—an impulse, or an effort. From my eyes the veil fell in that one second when I knew he had broken his promise and deceived me. But I said nothing; I uttered no reproach. ‘Of what use?’ I said to myself. In something I have failed—I know not what. I am already forsaken in the spirit. Why strive to recall fire from ashes—life from death?”

“That night I left him. I have never seen him since I had thought it no sin to live with him so long as love meant all I thought it meant; but I should have held it deadly shame to live on knowing I might have been his wife, and *he would not* make me so. For him, love was over; had he prayed me till words failed, to wed him *then*, I would not have done it. It was not the empty honour, not the certainty of a tie death alone could break, that made wifehood sacred to my thinking. No; it was love and love alone, and from *his* heart it had died out—for ever!”

* * * * *

“I thought my heart was broken; but I live still. I

live, though! life is only a memory of anguish and a daily sense of desolation. Perhaps I shall be old; I pray not; but how can I know? Old! my God! to think that life can be so long and years so many, and in all those years but *one* to be glad in—or remember!”

Her voice ceased. Deep silence reigned; silence broken only by a half-suppressed sob from the kneeling girl, though the eyes of her for whom she wept were dry and tearless.

“I meant to take my secret with me to the grave,” she said, after a long pause. “I do not know how or why I was tempted to tell it to you.”

“I thank you for your confidence, dear signora. You know I will respect it, do you not?”

“Yes, Nita, you are a good girl. Oh, my child, let my life be a warning to you! You are very young, and you are fair and gifted, and your life is a hard one, and full of temptation. But still, let my fate warn you from my example; and if you ever love, think of me and my words. There is always the *future*. Ah, child, one should be very, very sure of the present ere risking what is more than life itself—to a woman.”

“But is one ever sure?” the girl asked softly.

The woman sighed.

“God help us! No; for with us love is all, and—love is blind!”

* * * * *

It was midnight.

The girl had left, but the woman still sat by the window, the moon-rays silvering her bowed head with a strange halo, the cool night-wind fluttering the leaves of the MSS. on the little table.

At last she rose, and going to the chest where I had lain so long, she drew forth a packet of letters, and read them slowly, one by one. As she finished the last, she laid the little heap down beside me, and lit the lamp she usually burned in the evenings.

Then, with a strange anguish in her face, she thrust one

of the letters in the flame, and set fire to the rest. The little heap blazed and burned, throwing a glow of light on the white face and dark, sad eyes bent over them; then the light paled, wavered, died. Only a little mound of ashes lay where the records of that one strong, fatal passion had spoken to her with the spell of the past.

She did not cry, or weep, or moan; she only stood there silent as a figure of marble, sad as a statue of despair. Suddenly her eyes fell upon me; she took me up.

"You, too, speak of my past," she said; and her cold lips kissed me with sudden passion.

What was it—some memory, some instinct that warned her—that made her pause, and gaze, and gaze on me as if some ghostly face had risen before her eyes, and confronted her with features once familiar and beloved—now changed, and corrupted, and horrible.

"*It was his,*" she cried, in a voice of terrible anguish. "It is *his* name carved here, as he used to carve it as I have seen him carve it a hundred times in almost invisible letters, and all this time I have had it, and not known—and not known——"

She sank on a chair, holding me still clasped to her breast. I heard her heart beat with fierce, loud pulsations; then I suddenly saw her face change and grow grey and hueless; her lips turned blue.

"Oh, God," she cried, "that pain—that awful pain—again."

The agony of her face was terrible. Each second her sufferings seemed to increase. Her great dark eyes gazed upwards as if searching for some help, some pity in another world. Then she fell forwards, her arms still round me; her last breath sighed upon the strings on which her cold lips rested.

She was dead.

Dead; and her life's history lay beside her. A little heap of hueless ashes, and a name graven on my frame, as it was graven on her lifeless heart.

That name was Francesco Delli.

CHAPTER II.

FOUND !

“ So sad, so strange,
The days that are no more ! ”

TENNYSON.

NEXT morning they found her. She had died of heart disease—so it was proved. Nita wept passionately over her when she saw the white still frame, the placid marble face, the colourless lips that chilled her own when she touched them in a last farewell.

No one knew anything of her—so it seemed. She left no clue as to who or what she was. Friendless and solitary she had lived and died; and, but for Nita, her grave would have been left to charity or chance to provide. But the young singer generously took upon herself all necessary expenses, though she could ill afford it, and her hand strewed that nameless resting-place with summer lilies and fragrant roses, gathered in their freshest and fairest bloom.

As for me, my fate was soon pronounced. The people of the shop over which the dead woman had lodged, declared she owed them money, and as I was the only article of value she possessed, gave it out as their intention to sell me. Nita remonstrated, declaring that signora had always paid regularly and faithfully; telling them, also, the story of my discovery, and that I did not really belong to my late possessor. But in vain. Avarice and greed were not to be readily silenced by such remonstrances as these; and one evening I was carried to the shop of some man who dealt in musical instruments, and there, after much haggling and bargaining, I was left, my barterer receiving a good round sum in exchange.

I took no account of time now. In the colourless

monotony of my existence there was nothing to chronicle or note. I feared my rightful owner would never claim me again, and as much sorrow as was in me to feel I felt, wondering how Tista was, and how the pretty idyl had ended or would end.

One evening, as it was growing dusk, some one entered the shop and asked to see some violins. The voice was Tista's voice.

I was hung up among a score other instruments, and so far away that I knew he could not recognise me in the dim light. Meanwhile the dealer showed him one violin after another, but none seemed to please him. At last he produced me. The old familiar touch thrilled me with a passion of delight. Such melody fell from my strings, that the man paused in the action of reaching down another instrument, and turned and stared open-mouthed at the player.

Dusk and dark as it was, Tista's face beamed with a sudden wonder and delight.

"Is it possible?" he cried. "It must be. No two instruments have that tone. It is my lost Amati."

He took me to the light, and doubt was impossible.

"Where did you get this instrument?" he asked the dealer.

"I bought it," was the reply.

"How long ago?" persisted Tista.

"About a month."

"And it is three since I lost it!"

"Since you lost it, signor?" exclaimed the man in astonishment.

"I am afraid I shall have some difficulty in proving it," said Tista. "The facts are these."

He then proceeded to relate how Delli had lent him the instrument; how his habit of taking it everywhere with him had resulted in its loss; how he had searched and advertised for it in vain; and, finally, how Delli himself could swear to its identity, if necessary, inasmuch as his name was engraved on the instrument.

"This is all very well, signor," said the man, as Tista concluded, "but I purchased the instrument, and I gave a good sum for it. I cannot afford to lose it."

"Nor shall you," said Tista, eagerly. "I will pay you back, and interest as well. I have been nearly heart-broken over the loss of this violin. All these months I have had none, and have saved up every *paolo* I earned in order to buy another. Here—it is nearly double the sum you gave, by your own confession. Take it, and let me have my Amati back."

And well content with his bargain, the man yielded me up at once.

"Give me the address of the man who sold it you," said Tista, when the matter was finally settled.

The dealer did so. He had told the truth. He was not afraid of investigation into his story. One hour later Tista and I were in the dreary, wretched street where the woman whose story I had learnt, had lived, and suffered, and died.

The man who owned the shop, and had let the attic to his strange lodger, was out, so his wife said, and she knew nothing, or would know nothing, of the subject. As Tista lingered combating with her sullen answers and dogged stupidity, a light step echoed in the distance; a voice, clear and sweet as a lark's in its first young melody, fell pleasantly on the artist's ear.

He turned round. It was Nita. She came swiftly along; her flushed cheeks, her round lithe limbs, her dark sparkling eyes, making a pretty picture of youth and gaiety.

As she entered and saw the tall form of a stranger, she paused and looked at him curiously.

"Here; Nita," called the woman, "you know more of the signora who lived here than any one else. Can you tell this gentleman how she came by this violin? He says it was his, and he lost it."

"Yours, signora—was it yours?" cried the girl, eagerly. "Oh, the poor lady so often said she wished she could find the owner. I told Pedro he had no right to sell it."

because she always said she found it — lost somewhere in the fields out in the country yonder. And it is really yours?"

"Really mine," said Tista, smiling. "So far mine, at least, that my master gave it to me years ago, and has always refused to have it back. I was sorely grieved to lose it."

The woman, hearing her child cry, left the shop. The girl came nearer to Tista.

"It is a beautiful instrument," she said. "Are you an artist, signor?"

"I am trying to become one," said Tista, modestly. "And you?"

"I am a chorus-singer in the opera. They call me Nita."

"Have you no parents?"

"None that I know of, and no friends either. None, since the good signora is dead."

"Is she dead—the woman who found my violin?"

"*Si*, signor." And the girl's voice altered; her pretty eyes grew dim. If you like to come up, I will show you her room; it is mine now. I could not bear any one else to have it, and so I changed from mine to hers."

She led the way up the dark narrow stairway, and Tista followed. Thus once again I found myself in the same place where that sad tragedy had been enacted, where love betrayed had kept its faith in one long silent martyrdom, ended only with an ended life.

The room was altered. There were a few dainty trifles in it I had not seen before. There were flowers scattered in profusion. There was a little more furniture to relieve its bareness and dreariness, and the girl who stood now by the little window was very different in her youth and beauty and freshness to the weary, sad-faced woman who had sat through the long hours at her endless work in this same place but one short month before."

"Will you be seated, signor?" said Nita.

Tista glanced around, half hesitating; perhaps he won-

dered that the girl should so frankly have asked him here to her own room, but certainly Nita did it in all innocence and carelessness.

He took a seat, and the girl began her story.

"I have lived here for some months now," she said. "I told you I was engaged as a chorus-singer at the opera. When I first came the signora was living here, and had done so for several years. No one knew anything about her. She was poor. She worked hard. She had no friends, but she was a lady; that one could tell. She was kind to me always. I do not know why, for I am very different to her, being only of the people and ill-taught, though they say I have a voice and talent; but there, that matters nothing. Well, as I say, she was good to me, and would ask me here, and talk, or hear me sing, and give me lessons in acting, for she had been a great actress once herself, though now she hid her name and chose to live unknown. One evening she told me she had found this violin; it had been left in the fields out—far out—in the country way, as one goes to the Madonna's shrine at St. Lucca. She brought it home and set inquiries afoot, but could never find out to whom it belonged. That night—the last night I saw her, signor, she bade me play to her. I have some knowledge of music, and can play a little. My father dealt in instruments of all sorts, and I, when a little one, used to pick up what I could, and he often taught me when he had the leisure. He is dead now—the saints rest his soul. But as I was saying, the dear signor bade me play to her, which I did. She wept much. It was strange that she should weep, I thought, having always seen her so calm and quiet and silent. When I left her she was sitting yonder, by the lattice, at some copying work she used to do. When I saw her again—dead, signor, pardon me, I cared for her more than I know; I cannot but weep to think how sad a fate was hers—when I saw her again, she was *dead*. Here she sat, by this table, her arms around the

Amati, her head resting on it, just as if she had fallen forward with it in her arms; and so her soul passed away!"

The girl was weeping bitterly.

Tista was silent for sympathy. "And you know nothing of her real name—her history?" he asked at length.

"Something of her history she told me on that last night," said Nita, raising her head and wiping away the tears that rested on her long eyelashes. "It was very sad, but of her name, her real name, she said nothing. When she had gone, they searched for some clue as to her friends or birthplace, but in vain. No letter—no paper—nothing was found. I think she must have burnt her letters before she died, for on the table beside her were a heap of ashes and fragments of blackened paper. Perhaps she wished to keep her secret, and so carried it with her to her grave?"

"Poor creature!" sighed Tista. "What an unhappy fate."

"I am glad you have secured your instrument again, signor," said the girl, after a short pause. "The man who has the shop below sold it; he said she owed him rent, though I never believed it; but then, I could not prove she did not."

"I am also glad I have recovered it," said Tista, laying his hand lovingly on me once more. "I have had many a weary search for it."

"It would be, perhaps, asking too much of the signor to play to me," said Nita, timidly. "But I may never see him or the instrument again, and I love music so dearly."

She hesitated, blushing and confused, as she met Tista's grave eyes and surprised face.

"I will play—certainly, if you wish it," he answered.

For a few moments she listened in silence. Then her breath came quick—her eyes brimmed over with tears. Tista suddenly laid me down; his face had a look of wonder, almost of awe.

"Did you say the dead woman had it in her arms when you found her?" he asked in a low hushed voice.

“Yes, signor.”

“I remember once,” he went on dreamily, “once when I was a child, hearing of some celebrated player who was passionately fond of his violin; he was told that the one thing his instrument needed to make it perfect was a soul. ‘And it shall have one,’ he said. At that time his mother was ill—dying, I believe. She lived in some far-off land, and when he heard of her danger he travelled night and day to reach her. Was it anxiety to see her—was it duty—love? No, though all thought so. He reached her side. He bade all her attendants go out and leave him alone with her. She opened her eyes and saw him beside her. Her feeble lips opened to bless him. He bent over her and laid the sound-post of his violin upon them. Her dying breath was breathed in it. The soul, freed from its earthly prison (so the legend says), was caught and kept in this strange tenement. Be it how it may, no player, ‘Your instrument has indeed a soul,’ he shuddered his. It seemed to hold the key to all expression—the power to teach all passions and emotions that sway the human heart. Joy, sorrow, anguish, laughter, tears—all these it could wake at will. But when they said to the player, ‘Your instrument has indeed a soul,’ he shuddered and trembled. Perhaps—so the story says—he was bound to forfeit his own in exchange. He was a most unhappy man—restless, capricious, dissatisfied; but he had the fame of a whole world, and the memory of all future ages.”*

“Is he dead?” asked the girl softly.

“Yes; he died with his beloved instrument in his arms, and begged that with him it might be buried. That last wish was not complied with, but no other owner of the charm-haunted violin could ever produce such sounds as he had done.”

“How strange a story!” said Nita, in an awe-struck voice. “Is it true, signor?”

“I almost doubted it till now,” answered Tista.

* This really is a legend related of the famous Paganini.

"Why now?" she said, in wonder, as she looked up at his pale, grave face.

"Because this instrument has just such a tone; when I lost it, it was beautiful; now, it is perfect. I was frightened myself when I heard its sounds a few minutes ago."

"Then the signor thinks——"

"That the dying woman has breathed a charm into it; yes."

The girl looked at him with wide, frightened eyes.

"And you will keep it, use it, play on it—unblessed unexercised?"

"Most certainly; it has gained the one thing it needed—a soul."

"Oh, signor!" gasped Nita in terror; "do not speak so, do not tempt the evil one to do you harm. Oh, holy Jesu, how you frighten me!"

He did not seem to hear or heed her. He took me up with a strange absorbed face and eyes like a sleep-walker, and holding me close to his breast he left the room and the house. Then only he spoke. "I may win fame at last, and fame means—*her*."

CHAPTER III.

THE STRAD'S STORY.

"I can Afford to Wait."

"The little rift within the lover's lute,
That slowly widening makes the music mute."

How did it happen that the first coolness, difference, misunderstanding took place? Aye, how?

It is difficult to say; there seemed to be so little tangible ground or foothold, and yet there was enough. What Delli wrote to Daphne I cannot tell. I only know that the

old friendship was resumed ; that the constraint and coldness appeared to wear off : and *she* seemed to forget what he himself had once told her, that friendship between a man and a woman he has once loved, is a thing well-nigh impossible.

Did he forget? No. But he was acting a part, and he did it skilfully and well.

"You have not heard from Tista of late?" he said to her one day. "No? Well, he is getting strangely forgetful; but youth is youth."

"He is much occupied," Daphne said timidly, as if in explanation.

Delli flashed a look on her.

"Occupied! Should any occupation make him forget *you*?"

"He does not forget," the girl said proudly. "I can trust him perfectly. But you know how hard he works, and how much depends upon his success, and lately he has seemed despondent; enemies have begun to appear; ill-nature and rivalry are at work; his task is by no means easy."

"Daphne!" said Delli earnestly, "there is much genius in Tista, but people have begun to say of late that it is a sudden plant, fair but without root; dazzling with its wealth of colour one moment, dead and dull and scentless ere maturity is reached. I know not: it may be so. Greater men than I are at the head of the Academy, and say all he can do is done. That is not well. Some advise that he should travel; see other lands; visit other countries. A musician, like a painter, needs new colours, new scenes, new effects. There is nothing so wearying as sameness."

"Travel!" echoed Daphne, in bewilderment.

"Yes; is the idea painful to you? What is best for him is what you must think of, for assuredly Tista will never think of it himself. I have lived with him; I know. He always needs a stronger hand, a wiser head than his own, to guide or control him."

"I think he is perfectly able to be his own guide—to direct his own actions," answered Daphne with a calmness that her flushed cheek and kindling eyes belied.

"You think so, yes; because he is dear to you. From the standpoint of a calm and unselfish friendship I see his faults as well as his virtues. I only speak for his own good, Daphne."

"Yes, I know; I was hasty, perhaps. Do you know if he wishes to travel? Has he said so?"

"Often; but perhaps he thinks you would object."

"I! He has never hinted at such a thing in his letters."

"Has he not?" said Delli with a peculiar smile. "You see I hear *of* him as well as *from* him; so I have both sides of his actions to judge from. Now you——"

He paused meaningly.

"I am perfectly satisfied to judge by himself," rejoined Daphne, hastily. "I shall write and tell him he ought to travel if—if—these people think it necessary. I would not stand in the way of his future good for any recompense in the world."

There was a long pause.

"You did very well last night," said Delli, presently, as if seeking to change the subject.

"Did I?" she answered absently; I am glad you think so."

"You will soon be having other engagements offered you," he continued; "it will be in your power to gratify that wish to travel, I have so often heard you express."

She looked at him gravely.

"Do you think I shall ever do anything really good? It seems so difficult, and there are so many better."

"Better than you! Your voice is matchless! you have all Florence at your feet now. Each year, as you gain experience, you will also gain greater triumphs. Your future may be as brilliant as you wish."

"Do you remember what you said once about fame when a woman possesses it?" she asked him suddenly.

"It was long ago; I was but a child, but I have thought of it often since."

He turned aside to conceal the emotion her words had called forth. His voice grew unsteady as he answered—

"Yes; I remember. Are you afraid the laurels will be bitter to you?"

"There is always something wanting in every life," she said sadly; "none is complete."

"By itself; no."

She flushed all over her beautiful face; doubtless she thought of her lover, but *he* was thinking only of her.

"I am so glad the Amati is discovered again," she said suddenly; "was it not strange how Tista found it?"

"It was singular, yes; he traced it through some singing girl who is attached to the opera-house. I hear he is giving her lessons out of gratitude for the assistance she rendered him in making the discovery."

Daphne's face grew suddenly pale.

"That is not the story he told me," she said.

"My dear child," said Delli, with an indulgent smile; "do you suppose men, especially young men, ever tell the truth to women?"

"I know nothing of men or their ways," answered the girl, proudly. "I only know Tista always tells me the truth."

"An instance—in the present case."

"You may be misinformed."

"Ask him if I am."

"That would appear as if I listened to traducers, signor, and doubted him."

She did not see the smile of triumph on his lips. How well he had judged her! How fatally for her was that supreme trust and pride betrayed in her words now!

"You are right," he said calmly; "it might appear so to—him."

Soon after this he left her; but that night when he was alone, he paced up and down his solitary chamber with a fierce, strange unrest—a passion of joy in his face, a gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"It works already," he said. "First distrust, then jealousy; a long absence, which I can easily secure—a season of triumph for her, of failure for him; and then——"

He paused; his face grew dark and troubled.

"Even if I win her, will it content me?" he murmured. "I, who all my life have gained but to despise; have loved but to weary of my toy; have coveted triumph and achieved success; have been the idol of courts and circles only to despise my worshippers! Yet this is different. At last I love. It is not the frenzy of a moment now; no, it is the passion of a life. Yes, she must be mine, and she *will!*"

Then he sat down and wrote, as he had done on another night. But his face looked troubled now, and in its fierce unrest a certain softness and compassion seemed to dwell.

"To give *her* pain," he said softly, "it is hard! It needs all my courage to deal the blow; and yet, if I mean to win her, it must be dealt. If only I had left him alone! Why did I raise him from his own sphere? He might be safe in Cremona now, selling violins and eating his garlic stews content. Ah! why did I meddle with the old blind goddess Fate? Does she not always serve us so? Only we will never believe it till too late. I served him, and now I am beggared! Of life I ask but one gift, and that is denied me. Well, they say Vengeance needs but a long patience; so does Love. For once in all the years I have lived, I can afford to—wait."

He pushed aside his writing materials with a sigh of intense weariness. At this moment his servant entered, and announced a visitor.

Delli started, and looked at the card.

"At this hour?" he muttered. "Yes, show him in, of course, Beppo."

"Strange," he said, when the servant had retired; "ten years or more since I saw him, and to come—now."

The door opened again, and a tall, handsome man, long past middle-age, but of striking appearance, entered

"Ah, Francesco!" he said, and extended his hand in welcome.

Delli bowed low.

"I am delighted to see you, *eccellenza*," he said. "To what do I owe such an unexpected honour?"

"It is unexpected I doubt not," said the visitor, in a voice that, despite his efforts to modulate it, sounded singularly harsh. "It is long since we met, is it not, Delli? those days when you played Leporello to my Don Giovanni, eh? Ha, ha!"

"I scarcely supposed you would have remembered them," said Delli coldly.

"Oh, yes!" laughed the other. "Where pretty women are concerned I have always a good memory. But the truth is, Delli, I want your help."

"For some love escapade? I have done with such matters now."

"No, no! nothing of *that* kind; though it surprises me to hear of your turning virtuous. You are not married, are you?"

"No."

"Well, well, I suppose you know your own affairs best. But I must make my story brief. I am in haste to get to Rome on important business. Since I saw you last, Delli, many things have befallen me. Through deaths and accidents, the lands and titles I never hoped to inherit have fallen to me—at last. You see what I am—a man no longer young, and a man whose life's history is fairly exhausted."

"I congratulate you from my heart on your good fortune."

"It is not such good fortune. The estates are impoverished; the money is scarce, and pledged already for debts of honour. However, I must make the best of it. But what I want you to do is this: I have been wild and bad enough all my life, Heaven knows; but there is an action which I have never ceased to regret, and that is——"

"Not running away with the little Bianca, *eccellenza*?"

"No; that never troubled me. She was no Gretchen to die of shame on her prison bed. It is a different affair altogether. When I knew you—let me see—eight, ten, no, twelve years ago—was it not?—you remember how you used to plague me about my constant visits to Vinci?"

"Yes; and you always had the excuse of rents, or stewards, or something of the kind."

"True. Well, I was married."

"Married!" echoed Delli, in amazement.

"Yes. No one knew; no one has heard of it but yourself. The story is simple enough. I saw a girl with a face like—well, descriptions are useless. I have never seen its equal—that is all. She was poor, but too proud for any of my usual inducements to sway her for one moment. I loved her. You know me of old, Delli. Love was a frenzy; I agreed to anything, everything she desired. We were safely and surely wedded. She had but one relative—a father—a man full of one craze, and that was music. She left him at my bidding, and came with me. I told her our marriage must be kept secret, on account of my rank. She made no opposition; once she knew herself my wife, she was a slave in obedience and devotion. Perhaps that wearied me; I do not know. After our child's birth I cared less; my visits grew rarer; but she never complained. I think she had an angel's patience. Ah, Heaven, how did I repay it? Well, I had not seen her long—in fact, I had almost forgotten that I had a wife—when suddenly I received a letter saying she was dying. It was a shock—a real shock, Delli. In a passion of grief and repentance I rushed to her side. I was too late. The letter had been delayed, and when I reached Rome she was dead. An old man had come to her, the people said—her father, I believe. She had not known him; but he had buried her, and taken the child away with him. I did not care much for that. A female child would have only been an encumbrance to me; I should not have known what to do with her.

"Of all that had happened to the mother before she

took that sudden journey to Rome I know nothing. Perhaps she had heard I was there; and it is true I had been, but not to stay. When I went back to the villa where I had left her, I found a letter addressed to me. It stated that she was ill and unhappy, and was going to seek me, and beg me to care for her child, if she should be taken away from earth, as she sometimes feared. There were no reproaches for all my wrong-doing to her, bitterly as I deserved them. For a moment I thought of seeking the child and doing my best for it. But I remembered again my straitened means, my restless, wandering life; and, in truth, I dreaded the old man's merited reproaches; more especially as my wife, in obedience to my wishes, had never told him we were married. Besides, I had never cared for the child. She was a strange little thing, whose eyes always seemed to rebuke me for her mother's sufferings. I left the place, sold the villa, and passed my life in my usual manner till now."

"And what disturbs you now?"

"This. Of course, impoverished as the estates are, they will descend in time to my heirs. The girl must not be wronged by strangers. I have sought her, therefore, with both interest and remorse, but as yet in vain."

"And is it for this you seek my assistance?"

"It is. Naturally I do not care to have too much publicity thrown upon the facts, but I wish to find my child."

"Rather late in the day for parental affection to revive, interrupted Delli dryly.

"Are *you* the fit person to rebuke me for that?"

Delli's face paled.

"No, I am not. God knows my own sins weigh heavily enough upon my conscience. Still, I scarcely see how I can help you in this matter. What was your wife's name?"

"Beatrice Orgagna."

"And she was humbly born, you say. Of what birth-place?"

"I cannot tell. Her father lived at Cremona after our marriage, but he is long dead."

"And what became of the child after his death?"

"If I knew, do you suppose I should be here now?" said the stranger fiercely. "It is just that which I cannot discover."

"What was the child's name?"

"The same as her mother's, I believe."

"You *believe*. Are you not even sure of that?"

"No. Because my wife called her by some fanciful name of her own; and—well—think how long ago all this happened, Delli. Why, *amico*, how pale you look. What is it?"

"A sudden memory—and yet—no, it cannot be possible. It would be too strange. Count, did you say Orgagna was your wife's name?"

"Yes. What of that?"

"I remember being at Cremona some years ago, and there was an old musician there, sacristan to some church, with whom I had a slight acquaintance. The name was Orgagna, and he had a grandchild living with him—a girl of singular beauty and intelligence."

"Yes, yes," said his friend, impatiently. "That is just as far as my own researches have taken me."

"But mine go further. The girl had a wonderful talent for music. I passed many of my leisure hours in instructing her. On leaving Cremona I also left my address with her, bidding her, if ever she needed a friend, apply to me."

"Has she ever done so?"

"Never. But yet I know her, signor. I will not prolong your suspense. If indeed Daphne Orgagna be your child she is found already."

"Delli, you are not jesting?"

"Could I jest on such a sacred subject as a father's feelings?" was the sarcastic rejoinder.

"Daphne, Daphne," pursued the other musingly. "Yes, that is the name her mother used to call her by. Strange that you should know the girl. What is she like, Delli?"

"She is beautiful, gifted, proud; with a grace that is exquisite, and a voice that charms all men's ears. She is

now at the opera-house here, fulfilling an engagement that has already made her famous."

"What! on the stage. My child?"

"Even so, *eccellenza*; but then you must remember neither she nor the world in general know she is *your* child."

"Delli," said the other, hoarsely, "you know her, you say? Is she safe? Has harm come to her? You know what I mean. A young, unprotected girl, beautiful as you say, and thrown upon a public life. Oh, heaven, I never thought——"

"You never thought," echoed Delli, sarcastically. "No. Few men do think of the youthful follies whose consequences follow them in after-life with the merciless persistence of a Nemesis. But rest assured of your daughter's safety. She is not a girl to be lightly won; certainly not a woman to forget her own dignity, or let others forget it."

"You speak warmly Delli."

"It is not in a man's power—certainly not in *mine*—to speak otherwise of Daphne."

"When shall I see her?"

"To-morrow, if you will. Come with me to the opera."

"So be it. Delli, one word. I have known you long. We have been friends as the world counts friendship. Let us be friends still. Despite my titles and lands, I am poor. You are a rich man, and famous now in your way. Besides, you come of a family old and great as my own. It does not need a seer's glance to read your wishes, *amico*. You love Daphne. Well, you shall wed her if you will. You know her history. I should not care to have to tell it to a stranger—leaving alone the fact that her mother was far below my own station in life, and at this far date of time, proofs of my marriage would be difficult to produce. Do you hear? Why, how strange you look. I am not wrong in my supposition, am I?"

"Wrong? No. I love her with the very madness of idolatry. To make her mine is the one hope and desire of my life."

"Well, I say you may do so. What is the obstacle?"

"She has another lover—a poor, humble-born youth, for whom she keeps up her childish friendship; a lover in no way suited to her rank—her beauty."

"Nay, do not vex yourself for that. She must obey me. I am not likely to permit such folly to last."

"Daphne is very self-willed!"

"And what am I, *amico*?"

"True," said Delli, gravely. "But you must not force her. Let me win her my own way, for there is one thing I desire even more than herself, and that is—her love."

"Obtain the one—the other will come."

"So all men think—until——"

"Until when, Delli?"

"Until they at last love. Then their own hearts teach them how great an error such belief is."

CHAPTER IV.

"HE HAS FORGOTTEN.

VIOLINO 1mo.

Andante con Variazione.

VIOLINO 2do.

p

sf

p

SPORR.

THE red evening light was burning over the black shadows of the houses, and on the grey walls and church spires of Florence. Bells were tolling for vespers. The scents of orchards—of dried crushed leaves and ripened fruits—were everywhere. A girl sat at an open window and looked out, with sad unseeing eyes.

It was Daphne.

On the couch beside her I lay, just where Delli had thrown me an hour before. I had not seen them together for many weeks—not since that day when her father had sought him and learnt of his child's welfare from his lips.

How Daphne had taken that news, and how she had met and received the parent who had so long neglected her, I am unable to say. I only know that she was living with him in Florence; that she saw and mingled in society, and wore silks and satins and jewels, and was *fêted* and caressed, and a great lady now. And yet—ah, she never had that look in her eyes when I saw her first, dreaming under the magnolia-trees in the sacristan's garden at Cremona. Nor when I saw her last, grown up to womanhood and fair as any painter's dream, and on her face the light that "never was on land or sea;" nor indeed on any face, or in any eyes, save those of a woman who loves.

To-night I saw the difference. Delli had been with her for long; talking of many things; ranging from subject to subject with a grace peculiarly his own, yet keeping always from that one subject which, ever present in his thoughts, was sternly banished from his lips.

Of Tista I heard never a word. She was not less cold to Delli than of yore, but more restless and indifferent. She scarcely seemed to heed what he said, and her face seemed to have lost its youth, and her eyes held always that strange repressed look, as of something she longed to know, and yet dared not ask.

Sitting there now by the open window, with the red of the sunset on her glorious hair, and a knot of scarlet carnations in the folds of her white dress, she looked more beautiful than ever, but with a beauty changed and saddened, and infinitely more touching than the loveliness of girlhood.

She seemed in deep thought now. Her brow was troubled; the curved lips quivered with a sigh that ever and anon left them, and sounded infinitely sad in that hushed and silent room.

There was no one to see her—I being of no account and esteemed lifeless and sightless, and senseless—and she wore no mask on her face now. She looked as she was—a woman whose life's song had been sung—a woman with a

memory that haunted her unceasingly. A great lady, perhaps, with the gleam of jewels round her throat, and the lace folds of her robe sweeping the floor around her, and that knot of scarlet flowers against her beautiful white breast. Oh yes, great and rich, and fair, undoubtedly; but no longer happy as the child I remembered in the old villa gardens; no longer coming through the lily-whitened grasses with a song on her lips and a smile in her eyes—no longer standing lost in happy maiden dreams of some blissful future close at hand which the key of love had thrown open to her gaze, and into which her feet half longed, half dreaded, to stray.

The sunset fires died out. A purple gloom fell round her, folding her in tender shadows. Then she rose and left the window, and came slowly over to where I lay.

“He has forgotten,” she said. “It must be so. It is four long weeks since I wrote, and still no word; four long weeks since I told him of the change in my circumstances, of my father’s claiming me, and still no word; four long weeks of watching, waiting, weeping, and he is silent still! What can it mean? Oh, if I could but see him for one hour; if only we stood face to face once more, with no web of secrecy or distrust between us! Nothing is the same as it used to be—nothing. The music is all gone out of my life now. Is it I who doubt too soon, or he who is faithless too easily? They say he is always with this singing girl now; but oh, I cannot believe it. It is but a few months since we parted; but a few months since he said, ‘The world holds for me but one woman, Daphne, and that is you’—and now? Ah, now he must have forgotten, or surely some word would have reached me. He knows my history; he knows how my father has claimed me; he knows I am thrust before the world whether I will or no, and that the world gives me nought of pleasure. Not one hour is there of my life now that I would not gladly exchange to go bareheaded in the sun as in the days of old, to sit amidst green leaves and flowers, a song on my lips that is never near them now, a music in

my heart that none can ever waken again, if *he* be what they tell me. But he is not—he cannot be!”

If I could have spoken I would have told her, “Keep that faith always,” but I could not. I could only hear her wild laments, and see her weep those bitter tears and listen to her calling always on those old dead days that would never, never return for any call, or any entreaty.

“One is so thankless,” she murmured; “once I longed to be rich and great, to mix with the world as the equal of those who scorned my poverty; and now—now, when I have nobles and princes at my feet, I am only sick and weary of them all, longing but for one voice, clinging but to one faith. They say I have no heart. I! dear heaven, if only I had *not*, some peace and comfort might still be mine; and I have none—none! There is never a voice in my ears that drowns the echo of his ‘*Giulietta mia*,’ and those words call back fresh as yesterday that hour when we sat together by the stream, and only the wind heard our vows, and the roses slept in the moonlight and scattered their petals at our feet; so near, so far away it seems—that one most perfect hour; but now, is it true I am only the great world’s darling—not yours, my love—my love?”

Her voice broke into sobs as pitiful as a child’s. With all her pride, she was so young—so young and so utterly alone. Her strength failed her now as she thought of it and thought perhaps of the years that were still to be lived and spent, with only that one sweet silent summer-time as a memory of joy she had known and might never know again.

It was two hours later when Daphne, freshly attired, and looking proud as any princess, swept into her father’s reception-rooms, carrying me with her. Then I knew Delli would be there; nor was I wrong.

It was a great *festa*. I saw many beautiful women and princely men, and among them all the old white-haired Count, Daphne’s father, looking so handsome and so proud of her as she stood by his side in the costly robes that heightened her wonderful beauty and made all men’s eyes

turn on her in admiration, and all women's in envy. No face was so lovely as hers ; but certainly none so cold and proud. It bore no traces of the passionate emotion I had witnessed. A bright flush burned on her cheeks ; her eyes gleamed black as night under their heavy fringing lashes, and her beautiful hair was coiled in crisp golden waves around her head, with diamonds shining star-like in its masses.

Delli's eyes never left her. She must have been blind indeed, not to see the purpose and passion in his glance ; or to deem his ceaseless attentions and devoted care but the outpourings of "friendship." Certainly a poorer mask man never wore than he wore that night. She sang repeatedly during the evening, each time her efforts being greeted with a rapture and adulation that might have raised a thrill of triumph in any woman's breast. They did not appear to do so in hers.

Late in the evening, when their guests had all left, she wandered out on the terrace, just beyond the windows. Her father, standing in the rooms within, saw her. He glanced at Delli.

"Shall I follow?" asked the latter impatiently.

"Yes. Remember it is your last chance ; to-morrow we leave."

Delli had been playing. He laid me hastily down, and followed the girl out into the quiet starlight.

He spoke a few words. She turned impatiently away, and came back to the windows. He followed, and laid his hand upon her arm.

"But if your father wishes it?" he said.

"It cannot make me do so," was the cold rejoinder.

"Daphne," he said earnestly, striving hard to keep his self-command—to restrain the passion that longed to break loose from its restraint—"Daphne, if indeed he whom you love were worthy of you, I would not urge my own upon your notice ; but indeed he is not."

"Suffer *me* to judge of that, signor. You have not ceased to malign him since we parted."

"Have I said more of his unworthiness that his own actions have proved?"

"Far more than a friend would have uttered, had friendship borne for you the meaning that it bears for me."

"Your rebuke is just, I allow. But, Daphne, my love for you so far exceeds all other feelings that I can think of nothing else."

"Is this the way you keep your promise, signor?"

"I have kept it so long, so long! Daphne, have a little mercy! Why are you so cruel to me? If, indeed, your love had met with like love, your faith with like faith, my lips would have been sealed for ever. But you know you cannot deceive yourself any longer. Tista's love was a boy's love—fierce, idolatrous for the moment—quickly exhausted, burnt out by its own intensity, cooled by a short absence. Oh, Daphne! where is your pride, your woman's strength? Even were he of your own rank, in your own sphere, it would be different; but to waste thought, love, care, upon one so far below you—one who does not possess the common virtues of gratitude or faithfulness—my child, is your pride not greater than this?"

She was deadly pale—pale as the hues of her trailing satins; her hands were locked together in an intensity of pride and pain and passion, all mingled with the shame she felt that her secret was thus laid bare to another's gaze, her thoughts to another mind.

"You are wrong," she said. "His silence proceeds from that very gratitude and faithfulness whose possession you deny to him. He fears to force himself upon my notice; he deems my present position a barrier he has not courage to surmount until——"

"Until you give him more encouragement, signorina?"

She flashed a contemptuous glance upon him.

"No, signor; until fame and fortune have placed him on an equality with those who would do well to imitate his retiring modesty!"

Delli bit his lip.

"Your pardon, fair lady. I confess I deserve the rebuke. If you still cling to your belief in Tista's faithfulness, I will not tempt to shake it any further; only it would be well to convince yourself if the object of your faith is deserving of so high an opinion. Ask the signora with whom Tista has spent all his evenings of late. Ask her also, with whom he has left Bologna? She will not deceive you. And then, if you think his silence proceeds from the attribute of—modesty, you must be indeed wilfully blind to a fact that most women are quick enough to discover."

"Do you think to further your own cause by speaking ill of another man, Signor Delli?"

"No, I do not. I am perfectly aware that every word I utter places me at a disadvantage; still I cannot be silent. What man could, knowing that a jewel he covets is thrown down before another man's feet, to be crushed in the dust and forsaken for a baser and more glittering gem that allures his vagrant fancy!"

"Once for all," she said, with a certain tired impatience that broke through the scorn and coldness of her voice, "once for all, signor, learn that, worthy or unworthy, I cannot unlove at will."

"And you will not try to love me? You will not think more kindly of my hard fate, even if time proves which love is true, which false?"

"No, no, no!" she cried fiercely, her hands pressed tight against her heart, her eyes full of pain and misery and despair.

"Am I so hateful?" he asked.

She hesitated.

"I did not hate you—once," she faltered slowly. "But——"

"But now I am to suffer for his faithfulness? Oh, Daphne?"

His voice was so imporing, the agony in his face was so intense, that she looked at him in faint wonder.

"Do you care so much?" she said slowly. "Oh, then, have pity on me! I love too!"

And with bowed head and quivering lips she hurried from the room.

He stood a moment silent. His face showed the fierce battle going on within. When he raised it at last, it was white and bloodless as the dead.

"She *must* believe!" he said, and his voice had a ring of terrible determination in it. I have gone too far to give in—now."

"Well, Delli, and has the wooing prospered?" asked the count, approaching him at this moment.

"No," said Delli curtly. "Your daughter is true to her plebeian instincts, and prefers a boor to a gentleman."

"Your zeal carries away your temperance, *amico mio*," was the cool rejoinder. "If I mistake not, I have often heard that plebeians own a virtue patricians are often wanting in—it is *fidelity*."

Delli bit his lip, and frowned angrily.

"A fitting preacher of what you termed a woman's worst crime, *eccellenza*!" he said mockingly.

"True; but then this time it is not I who suffer for the crime!"

"Do you wish Daphne to marry this lad? A fine match, truly, for one of your race, count!"

"I do not wish her to marry any one at present. I am getting fond of the girl, incredulous as you seem. She is beautiful and gifted and proud, and has a certain grace about her that is charming. If you cannot win her, Delli, there is no other ambition at work within me at present. We suit each other, and she may stay with me as long as she pleases."

"I shall win her, if you only give me time."

"Time is costly, *amico*, and——"

"You know you can command all I have. You know, too, that at any moment my uncle may die, and then——"

"Then you will be a second Cræsus; so report says. Is that what you wish to convey?"

"Money is no value to me, count."

"You foolish Delli. Why have you not kept heart-whole, like myself. A little love is all very well—a pleasant excitement that gives flavour to life as the olive to the wine; but a bad passion like yours, and for one who cares not whether you live, or die, so long as you trouble her not—*altro!* it is foolish indeed!"

"Do you wish to insult me?" said Delli fiercely.

"*Amico*, I? Nothing do I desire less!"

"Then leave me and my folly alone. Heaven knows I have to suffer enough for it. Do you think I have not tried to conquer? Do you think I have not tried to forget? Oh, *Dio mio!* how hard!—how hard! but I only love her more!—I only love her more!"

His voice shook and broke. That fatal love mastered him as no other passion had ever mastered him yet. The count looked with momentary pity at that white face. Then it changed, and grew still and cold, and set with an impenetrable stillness, as an Italian's face so often does, when it seeks to master some hidden pain.

"Farewell," he said. "You have never loved; you do not know."

And he left him standing there in the white, calm moonlight.

"Poor Delli!" murmured the count softly, as he smoked his dainty cigarettes, pacing up and down the terrace. "No, I have never loved like *that*—thank Heaven for it!"

CHAPTER V.

"BE WISE IN TIME."

"Sweet is true love, though given in vain—in vain;
And sweet is death who puts an end to pain,
I know not which is sweeter—no, not I.

"Love, art thou sweet? then bitter death must be;
Love, thou art bitter; sweet is death to me.
Oh, love, if death be sweeter, let me die!"

Elaine's Song, from "The Idyls of the King."

THE count had left the terrace, and was lounging in the balcony, when the door of the inner room opened and Daphne entered. She went straight through the unclosed window and stood beside him. Her sudden appearance seemed to startle him.

"Why, Daphne," he said wonderingly, "you should not be up still. I thought you had gone to rest long ago."

"I was not tired," she said quietly, "and I wished to speak with you."

"With me?" There was an accent of surprise in his voice. Perhaps such a request was unusual.

"Yes. I do not see much of you, and we are always surrounded by guests now. It is rare to have any moment undisturbed?"

"And on what important subject do you wish to consult me?" he questioned, ironically.

She hesitated a moment, and her voice trembled a little as she proceeded.

"When you claimed me as your child again," she said, "you told me I must forget the past. I must forego the triumphs I had anticipated, the profession I had chosen, the life for which I had been trained. You explained your reasons, and I did not combat them. As my father,

you had a right to my obedience, and I gave it. You asked if I had any friends whom it would be inconvenient to recognise in my new position, and I told you, none—for a friend whom I had once loved would always be the same to me, whether I were a princess or a peasant. Do you remember this?”

“I will soon tell you,” she said sadly. “The—the *one* friend for whom I cared has neither written nor taken any notice of my changed position since he learnt it from my own words. Knowing him as I know him, trusting him as I trust him still, this silence grows too mysterious to be borne in silence. Father, I have two questions to ask you. We have been strangers so long, that you must forgive an inquiry that looks distrustful. Have you any knowledge of this matter, or have you in any way interfered—at the instigation of *another*—to prevent further intercourse?”

“Daphne! Such questions are an insult. How dare you——?”

“Ah, pardon me,” she interrupted pleadingly; “pardon me for the imputation my words seem to convey; but indeed I am so sick with suspense, so weary with waiting, I can no longer hold silence.”

“My dear child,” answered her father, soothingly, “I know what you mean. I have heard something of this.”

“From Delli—is it not so? From the man who has maligned him and misjudged him, despite all professions of friendship.”

“No. There you wrong him, Daphne. This.—this unfortunate entanglement of yours has been known to me for long, and Francesco Delli has never said aught against the dreaming boy you have glorified into a hero, save to speak pityingly of the fickleness of youth. But now that you yourself give me an opportunity of alluding to this matter, I should like to ask what you mean to do—seriously. Suppose this young man, of whom I know nothing save that he is a genius—and I dare say, like all geniuses,

content with dreams and a garret—suppose, I say, that he was true to you, and that your love idyl became serious, how do you think I could consent that you—my daughter, the heiress of my wealth and possessions—should become the wife of a low-born peasant? I say nothing against his position, or profession. Music is honourable and a beautiful art, and one that is daily more esteemed; but, my child, is he your equal in any way? Is it possible for you to lay aside all the privileges and appendages of your present position and descend to his?”

“It is not only possible, but I would do it to-morrow at *his* bidding,” she said, proudly and coldly.

“And what of your duty?” asked her father sternly.

“My duty? I might ask you if the whim of a month, the caprice of a fancy, made reparation for eighteen years’ injustice and forgetfulness? I might ask you whether the child you have so long forgotten, owed more to you than to those who stigmatize as low-born peasants? Who has cared for me, nourished me, educated me? To whom do the affections of my childhood, the memories of my youth, belong?”

“Daphne, it is not dutiful to reproach your father thus. It is true I deserve blame, but I have learnt to love you very dearly, and you are all I have now.”

“I do not mean to reproach you,” she said, with sudden tenderness, such as her voice had never held for him before. “I only ask a plain question. I cannot forget the associations of my youth. I cannot be faithless to those who were good to me in the days of my loneliness and obscurity.”

“Then you really love this young man, Daphne?”

“Yes.”

It was but a simple affirmation, but it held all the truth and constancy of the girl’s young passionate heart.

“I have known him ever since I was a little child,” she went on softly. “I have not a memory or association that is not in some way connected with him. He loved me before all this change took place. We were equals then.

Our professions were the same. Why should I throw him aside and despise him now, when fortune has placed me higher than I ever thought to stand. Why?"

"Dear Daphne, you talk like a child," said her father soothingly. "Every position has its obligations. The old belief that love levels all ranks, is obsolete. It does nothing of the kind."

"Yet you married my mother."

"True," he said, and his voice grew troubled, as if with some memory that touched even his callous heart. "True, Daphne; but we were not happy; neither, believe me, would you be, if you wedded this youth of whom you think so highly. Is his resemblance of you as faithful, think you?"

"I could never have doubted it—once," she murmured sadly and humbly; "but of late——"

"Of late there has been a change. My child, at your years and his, what more probable? Love cannot outlive absence."

"There is some mystery about it," she repeated firmly.

"I could sooner doubt myself than—him."

"You are a true woman, Daphne," and her father sighed a little regretfully. Perhaps he thought of days gone by, when other lips had said the same of him, and with less cause.

"Father," she persisted, "you are sure there has been no false play—nothing done that could make him think me changed. Delli, I know, is jealous; he may have won you over to his way of thinking, and——"

"Nonsense, Daphne!" was the somewhat hurried answer. "You would not accuse Delli of dishonour?"

"No, it is not that——"

"What then?"

"I hardly know," she said wearily. "But it seems all so strange, so hard!"

"My dear, life is always strange and hard after we lose our first illusions. If you were wise, and would take my counsel, I would say—wed Delli. He has a great passion

for you, and he is well born, and will be wealthy far beyond ourselves. Why trouble your head about a foolish boy when the world will be at your feet—if you so will it? You are fitted to grace any rank, and you waste your beauty and your mind upon a beggar. For that is what he will be, this youth who is so friendless though so gifted—so Delli says.”

“Delli! it is always Delli!” she said impatiently.

“He is a true friend, and he will always be faithful to you,” answered her father. “I claim no obedience from you in this matter, Daphne; you must please yourself. Only—be wise in time, love is a pastime for idle moments, not a reality that lives through life.”

“To a man that may be,” she said. “But I am a woman, and I think differently.”

He made no further answer then—only kissed her brow, in his calm, paternal fashion, and went away, leaving her standing in the moonlight.

BOOK VII.

CHAPTER I.

THE AMATI'S STORY.

A Great Lady.

IT was pleasant to be in Tista's hands again. He was glad, too, very glad, and worked doubly hard to make up for lost time, and never wasted an hour in merry-making or feasting, as other youths and students of his own age did, but sat almost always at the labours his art demanded, and he ungrudgingly gave.

As days passed on I wondered to see nothing of Daphne. I did not know then she had gone to Florence to fulfil an engagement at the opera. Tista was very silent, and often very sad. He was always alone. Sometimes of an evening he would go out and be absent an hour or two; but when he came home he seemed more restless and melancholy than ever.

"It is strange she has not written for so long," he said once; and the shadows deepened on his young grave face, and his eyes looked weary, and full of a vain, intense longing that filled his whole heart.

At last one day a letter came. He was busy writing the score of his opera; but at sight of the tiny, dainty missive, he threw down his pen and seized it with trembling hands, his cheeks flushing and paling like a girl's in his joy and excitement.

But as he read, a great and terrible change came over

his face. The letter fell from his hand, and fluttered on to the table among the close-written sheets of his music. He never heeded it. He seemed blind and confused; his lips quivered; his hands shook.

"A great lady?" he said in an odd, strained voice—"A great lady! She—my Daphne! Am I dreaming?"

Then he looked at the letter. The pretty, perfumed, innocent-looking little letter that yet had power to change his peace to pain, his love to bitterness.

"What can it mean?" he muttered below his breath, and read it again and yet again, and with each reading seemed to grow yet more bewildered, and sat there with clasped hands and a look of agony terrible to see in his eyes, and all the youth and gladness in him turned seemingly to the coldness and desolateness of age.

"She is lost to me!" he said suddenly. "I read my fate in every line here. A great lady! Ah, but never my Daphne again!—never the child who roamed with me through the lily-whitened grasses! Never the maiden whose bashful lips confessed her love that sweet summer holiday so short a time ago!—never the idol of my dreams, the queen of my life again! For, if she be great like this, what can I be to her? It is worse than death—worse than death!"

He took up the letter again, and read it as if seeking for some grain of hope or comfort; and it seemed strange to me that he could find none, when she had loved him so dearly once. Was she indeed so great that she felt ashamed of her former life and all belonging to it? Did she feel herself bound to forget, because the wheel of fortune had so changed her life and her circumstances? Surely not.

And yet so he said, and he would not be likely to say it without strong and sufficient reason.

"I am so poor, so humble," he went on presently, as if the uttering aloud of his thoughts were some comfort or necessity in this miserable hour. "When she told me her story, I little thought it would end like this. Even if I

win fame, if the world's honours are granted me, if I come to her crowned with laurels, what can I hope for? She is far above me as the stars!"

Just then his eyes caught sight of another letter, which he had not noticed before in his eagerness to read hers. He took it up in an absent dull fashion. and broke the seal. A small roll of paper money fell out; he stared at it in suspicion.

A slip of paper was attached; he took it to the light, and read the few words it contained.

A fierce expletive burst from his lips; a flush of shame and anger dyed his brow.

"More insults!" he cried. "I am to be paid off for a friendship that is no longer desirable. The illustrious count—her father—thinks he can wipe off his debts thus, does he? Oh, Daphne! did you know of this, and could you allow it? Did you deem my love so presumptuous that it needed a blow so cruel to drive it from your presence henceforth? Oh, my love! have you learnt your lesson so quickly that you feel no compunction in trampling on my heart thus, as you pass on your way to happiness and triumph!"

He seized the notes in sudden passion; he thrust them into an enclosure and wrote some address on it with trembling fingers. Then he tore the paper that had accompanied them into a hundred fragments and scattered them to the winds.

"So ends my dream," he said; then folded her letter up and kissed it with wild, mad kisses, and crushed it to his breast in a lover's senseless tender passion that lavishes caresses on every lifeless thing that wakens memories of her he loves.

"I will keep it till I die," he said; and from his eyes the slow hot tears dropped like scalding rain. "It is her last gift—her last message. Oh, my love, my love; that this should be the end of all."

But it seemed to me that his life and his youth died then, in that hour whose passion and torture and abandon-

of worldly wisdom; lost to him as utterly as if death had divided them.

To me it seemed foolishness that he should yield so easily; that because of the barrier of position, he should condemn himself to suffering so terrible as this night fore-shadowed. I could not tell what her words had been, but she must have been changed very much if she could forget her love, or forego her heart's choice for rank's sake only.

When the dawn broke, he rose to his feet. His face had the pallor and weariness of long fatigue, his eyes were shadowed with dark circles; he looked years older than when that letter had reached him.

He drew some paper towards him and wrote these hurried words:—

"It shall be as you wish.

"FAREWELL.

That was all.

Then he took the other letter which he had written the previous night, enclosing the paper money her father had sent him, and with his face set in stern and fixed resolve he left the room.

I saw him no more that day. It was quite late when he returned. He came straight up to me and took me in his arms.

"I only live for you now," he said; "once I deemed no power or passion could be her rival; but art, to be served well, must be served alone, and I am alone henceforward."

But I knew the battle was not yet fought out. I knew that weariness was not conquest. I knew that in his heart a love burned that nothing could extinguish, and if I could have answered him I would have said, "True, art is a woman's worst rival, but the rival of art is a love unsatisfied."

For did I not know enough of men to know also that a love obtained grows calm as a mountain lake, but a love denied—a love that is all pain and longing, and striving

turmoil, beating against every self-raised barrier, mocking every effort at restraint; a sea that nothing can lull to rest, and whose waters are full of memories of all that "might have been."

Two days later we left Bologna, and went with an opera company to Paris. It seemed to me foolish of Tista to do this, but he appeared to hate Bologna. It was full of memories, and memories were only so much pain added to the bitterness of his life. Besides, though I only knew it later, jealousy and rivalry were at work against him there, and his last effort at the prize competition was a failure, and engagements began to fall off also, and he was poor—very poor—and dependent only on what he could make by his music; so when he received an offer to play leading violin in the orchestra of the opera company, he accepted it readily. Perhaps he longed for change of scene. Perhaps he thought that forgetfulness might be won with greater ease in a new land and a new life. In any case we went.

"You are mine now," he said to me one day; "mine for ever. Delli has given you to me. He seemed so pleased that I should travel. I wonder why. I suppose he thinks it best. He is my best friend; he would not counsel aught that was not wise or good."

So in the bright sweet time of the early autumn, when the scents of ripe grapes were everywhere, and the fruit began to fall from the boughs, and the arbutus-berries were red, and the plumes of maize grew brown in the fervent sunlight, we journeyed away from Italy—away from the clear violet skies, and the blue sea-waves, and the fragrance of the wild growing plants and flowers, and so on, travelling by night and day, to the great central plains of France.

When we reached Paris the manager of the little company became suddenly ill, and soon after he died, leaving his company to do as best they could, strangers in a strange city. They broke up. I don't know what became of any of them, save two—Tista and the pretty chorus-singer, Nita. The latter found a ready engagement

at one of the minor theatres, but Tista was not so fortunate.

He had but very little money, and he knew it would not last long, even with the greatest care; and he was always foolish and improvident, ready to give his last coin away to any suffering child, or whining mendicant, who appealed to his sympathies.

He had changed much of late. The softness and girlishness had all left him. He was grave with the gravity of mature years—his youth seemed to have been burnt out in the fire of suffering through which he passed.

The time went by very drearily. He worked hard and long, growing each day paler and thinner. He lived in a poor and humble quarter of the city, and had not a friend anywhere save Nita. She came from time to time to see him, cheering him with encouraging words, doing her best in her simple girlish fashion to keep him from the despair that was fast creeping over his life—the despair which is death to an artist's dreams.

"Would it not be better to return to Bologna?" she said to him once; "at least, you have friends there. Paris is so large, and to be alone in a wilderness of life, and quite unknown and quite friendless, it is terrible! For me it is different, you see. I have a trick of song that pleases, and can act fairly well, thanks to the lessons of the dear signora; but you——"

"I am so useless," he said bitterly.

"Nay," she answered hastily; "you are too great for common purposes. It is always so with genius. Mere talent can adapt itself to all circumstances. It never soars too high for men's hands to touch, or men's souls to grasp; but with you it is so different—so different. Your works are beautiful, your music seems as a voice from heaven; but in this strange, busy, whirling city, there are none to hear and none to care, no influence to raise you to a position such as you desire."

"Where do you get your wisdom from, Nita?" he asked in surprise.

"Is it wisdom to know life and the things of life, and

the follies and blindness of it all? Nay, signor, it is only observation; it is only that while you dream, I keep my eyes open."

"My dreams are all over, Nita."

"I hope not, signor. That you have had trouble, I know; sore trouble, too, for you are so changed from what you were when first I saw you at Bologna. But who is without it?"

"You, at least; you are as bright and happy as a bird. Your smile is like sunshine itself."

The girl's face flushed. Her deep soft eyes fell before his own. With a strong effort she seemed to answer him.

"It is my disposition to be happy. We are but as we are made, signor; and then I have friends here—people who are kind to me, and I am always busy, and so do not think much. But I am sorry for you, signor, always working so hard, always writing beautiful things that no one can see or hear of, and alone and friendless in a great vile city that has no time to give to you; no ear to lend to your sighs; no aid to bestow on your wants. Oh, it is terrible."

She looked round the dreary little attic with a shudder. There was no fire in the stove; it was only a cheerless, dusky, bare place, which for very cheapness' sake he kept.

He smiled now as she ceased speaking—a smile that had no brightness and no mirth—only an infinite weariness sad to see.

"There are worse things than bodily sufferings," he said; "I scarcely think of mine."

She looked at him awed and sorrowful. His thoughts were far away. She stood silently there, neither speaking nor moving, for she saw that he had forgotten her presence; and indeed he had. His eyes were on the pages before him, his cheek had a strange hectic flush, his hand trembled where it rested on the music sheets he had been writing. She watched him sorrowfully, pityingly. She could not but see how ill he looked, with that flush on his hollow cheeks, that feverish brightness in his eyes.

He looked up at last.

"Are you there, Nita?" he said; "I had forgotten."

She turned away; a tear glistened under her long eyelashes.

"It is always so, I heard her murmur under her breath; "he forgets me! You are busy, signor," she said aloud, "I will not interrupt you longer. Is—is that your opera still?"

"No," he said, turning a shade paler even than he had been before; "I have put that away. It is so useless for one like me to try anything great like an opera. I am writing some violin music, in the hopes that one of these Paris publishers will buy it."

"And you have heard of no engagement yet signor? No one has heard you play?"

"No; no one of any importance."

"And you will not go back to Bologna?"

"Do not speak of Bologna. Italy is hateful to me!" he said, with sudden passion in his quiet voice.

She trembled and turned pale.

"But it is so difficult to get on here," she said hesitatingly.

"I cannot help it; I must do my best."

She sighed, and then left the room as quietly as she had entered it. He did not seem to know that she had gone.

A few moments after, a woman entered and lit the fire, and placed beside him a bowl of steaming soup. He looked at her in surprise.

"Where did this come from?" he asked.

"Monsieur forgets," said the woman with a quaint smile. "it is part of Monsieur's dinner, that he had no appetite for yesterday."

"Is it?" he said wearily, and turned again to his work.

"She was right," said the good-humoured-looking creature, as she moved to the door. "He does not know. How easy it is to cheat these geniuses. Clever? why, they are fools. This boy would have starved himself to death by this time

if it had not been for her. Monsieur will not forget his soup?" she added, in a louder key.

Tista looked up with angry impatience.

"No, no," he said, "only leave me."

But the soup was cold ere he remembered it was there.

Was Nita after all the wiser of the two when she said genius was all very well, but where talent lives and thrives genius starves and perishes? True, the reward of one is forgetfulness; of the other immortality; but worldly wisdom has decided that since men can live but once, it is better surely to make use of that *once*, not exhaust body and soul in a long and thankless martyrdom at which the world will wonder, but none the less secretly despise.

Yet there must be in genius a strange madness and a marvellous strength, seeing that even in penury and oblivion it works on untiringly for pure love of the things it creates, forgetting even the abject bitterness of life, when life means only deprivation, suffering, failure; forgetting, too, that he who possesses it is but a slave to art, and oftener scourged with a lash, than caressed by a word of praise, or a whisper of encouragement. Nevertheless, the lash does not intimidate, and the sufferings may chill, but cannot destroy the fire that is alight within the soul.

And Tista now—in his lonely garret, and with his bruised heart and his deathless memory of the love he had lost for ever—Tista worked on as though some imperishable reward was the goal of his endeavours. If suffering slays the life of an artist, no less surely does it ennoble and glorify his works; and never had he created melodies more exquisite, weaved fancies more sublime, breathed music more passionate, tender, and perfect, than those which his hand transcribed now in this most bitter and cheerless time of his life.

But the toil and the labour brought him no recompense. From time to time he made fresh trials; he essayed fresh fields; but all in vain. His music was never accepted. Day after day I saw him come back with his roll of

papers under his arm. Day after day he would play his rejected melodies over on me, altering, revising, improving. "I cannot make it better," he would say wearily; "what is it they need?"

I could have told him—trash! Trash gilded and baited, and stolen from dead men's forgotten works, or living men's successful ones! Trash that was not original enough to challenge criticism, and whose gay familiar ring pleased the thoughtless crowd. But I could not speak, and if I could, he would not, or could not have written it; and so the dark cold days came on, and he became poorer and poorer, and the stove was fireless more often than before, and food scantier and coarser, and life more lonely and more sad. He tried his best, but what could he do? It was a struggle with Fortune, and Fortune only mocked him.

Sometimes I feared he might be tempted to destroy himself. Life was so wretched; and to him it meant only two things—misery and endurance! A pan of charcoal in his dreary attic one lonely night, and then all would have been over. But no; he struggled on and on, supporting life by means of humble employment, earning a few sous for copying orchestral parts for the theatres, playing in the cold early dawns—his only leisure times—living a life terrible to witness, uncheered by any human love, or any human pity save only that if the loyal-hearted girl who worshipped him in her fond, foolish way and whom he scarcely remembered.

"A great lady!" he muttered one dark, dreary night, as he lay down his pen and looked around him. "Thank Heaven, she does not see me now!"

And I knew then of whom he was thinking, even in his misery.

CHAPTER III.

THE STRAD'S STORY.

"Who Hast Hold of My Heart."

"Ah! sweet, who hast hold of my heart,
For thy love's sake I live;
Do but tell me, ere either depart,
What a lover may give
For a woman so fair as thou art.

The lovers that disbelieve
False rumours shall grieve,
And evil speaking shall part."

SWINBURNE.

DAPHNE and her father went for the winter to Rome, and Delli soon followed them.

Fortune was lavishing gifts upon him now. The uncle he had spoken of died shortly before Delli went to Rome, and bequeathed him a fortune large enough to render him independent of his profession. So, when the carnival time came, and the city was astir with the old joyous, foolish mumming that the people loved so well, he came there too, and the Count Falconieri received him with open arms.

"I think she has forgotten," he said. "You will be sure to win in time. She is always so quiet and so calm now, and cares so little for anything. Yes, she must have forgotten!"

"He is far away now," said Delli; "there is no likelihood of their ever meeting again. You are sure he has not written?"

"Quite sure."

"And she——"

"She has certainly not done so; she has waited for an answer to that letter you——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted Delli hurriedly; "I know. He never answered it, then?"

"Oh, yes! in two lines. *'It shall be as you wish. Farewell.'*"

"Did he keep the money?"

"The young fool! No; he sent it all back to me, every lira."

"Proud, even in his poverty. Well, he is done with; we need not trouble about him more."

"Do you know where the lad is now? I should not like him to come to harm; and though I know nought of him, I think there must be good in him, or Daphne would not have cared for him as she did."

"You do not think she cares still?" asked Delli anxiously.

"No; but she is a strange girl; one is never quite sure how to take her. She is not like any other woman I have known. I wish she were not so serious. Nothing seems to give her gladness, or pleasure. Every time I look at her face its patience and gentleness reproach me. I feel as guilty as if she knew what we——"

"Well, well, it was for the best," Delli again interposed, as if he dreaded to hear their joint treachery put into words; "for the best, as you yourself said. She could not have wedded him, that is sure."

"True. Let us think no more of it. You will come with us to-day, will you not?"

"Does she go?"

"Oh, yes. I leave her with friends; and you can either stay on one of the Corso balconies, or come with me in the carriage."

"Do you stay in the carriage? Are you not weary of this mummerly yet?"

"No; I think it is the only time Rome looks well, with the masquers thronging her streets, and a sea of colour filling the vast courts, and lighting up the gloomy walls and arched passage-ways, and fair faces looking from every

window and balcony, and groups fit for any painter's eye, where the girls stand atop of some high flight of steps, and dance and caper to the sound of mandolines. It is foolish, no doubt, but picturesque and gay, and it amuses me still."

"Then you leave Daphne in one of the balconies on the Corso?"

"Yes; she does not like the crowds, and the masquers, and soldiers, the cars and chariots. She calls it desecrating Rome. Her ideas of Rome are singular. She believes in it as it was in the earliest days, when all was austere, chaste, simple; not the Rome of Saturnian verses, or later on, the Rome of the present day. It is surprising she goes at all; she has refused hitherto."

Even as they spoke Daphne entered.

Her greeting of Delli was very quiet. She expressed no surprise at his presence, although she had not known of it. He, too, was grave and quiet. No one looking at his face and hearing his voice, would have supposed he was controlling emotion so great, love so intense, as her presence awoke within his breast.

But when the carriage came to bear them to the Corso, Daphne refused to accompany them. In vain her father urged; in vain Delli entreated; she would not. She wanted to be quiet, she said, and the noise and riot of the carnival were insupportable. There was no help for it; they had to leave her, though Delli rebelled sorely against her decision, and then tried hard to gain permission to stay also.

But she would hear of neither, and her father grew impatient; so at last they left her to the solitude she desired, and went their way.

For an hour the girl sat in that room alone, neither moving nor speaking, perfectly listless and perfectly passive, her head resting on her slender hands, her whole attitude bespeaking weariness and dejection.

At the end of that hour the silence was broken by a hurried step, and Delli once more entered.

"I could not help it," he said, staying her words as she half rose in her surprise and vexation at seeing her solitude thus disturbed. "I could not help it, Daphne. The noise and the crowd, and the folly of it all sickened me. You were wise to remain behind. But—are you going?"

"Yes; I am not well. I think I must leave you to entertain yourself."

"Daphne, am I so hateful? I have not seen you for so long, and now you grudge me even a few moments of your presence."

"I am poor company for any one, signor. It is the best kindness I can do you to leave you."

"It is cruelty. Daphne, have you heard the news? has your father told you?"

"That you are rich? Oh, yes!" she said wearily.

"And does it interest you at all?"

"Why should it? I suppose, like me, you will desert art and enjoy fortune instead. If your time be half as wearisome and half as cheerless as mine, I do not envy, and I cannot congratulate you."

"Daphne, we are both very unhappy. It is strange that it should be so. You are young, beautiful, rich, beloved. I—well, I have also a fair share of Fortune's favours; but they are valueless to me, because the one thing my heart covets I am denied. Daphne, what sort of union do you think that would be where both are unhappy, and both wearied of life as it is?"

"A very strange one, signor."

"And one you would not care to try?"

"What do you mean?"

"Listen. As your life is now, so it will be for many years. You think yourself bitterly unhappy, for you are young, and this is your first grief, and the sufferings of youth are very keen. But in time it will grow less sharp, and then—then, Daphne, you will look around, and if you be wise, will try and make the best use of what is left to you. Now I am going to give you advice that may seem worldly-wise and cold, but nevertheless is worth consider-

ing. Let life be what it may, no life is complete without—love. If you cannot have the love you crave, take the love that craves you. Rest assured that in time you cannot but feel its comfort and rest upon its strength, for you are a woman, and to women love of some sort is a necessity, absolute as any law of nature. Your father is not rich, though men count him so. At any moment, if his health fail, if loss or debt crowd upon his impoverished resources, what are you dependent on? You have his titles, and what he can do for you doubtless he will, but it is not much. Perhaps you will return to your old life—the stage. But that life, brilliant as it is, is yet a life full of temptation, peril, weariness, to a woman who has no protector, and has your beauty and your gifts. You see I am putting life before you simuly and plainly, as it may be. Look at it for yourself, and say, am I not right?”

“You are; but what then? it is a burden that I must bear, as others have borne it before me. My fate is not singular in that it is unhappy.”

“Will you not let me share your burden—comfort your unhappiness?”

“You could not,” she said bitterly.

“I could, if you would let me try.”

“Do you know what you are asking, signor? The hand of a woman whose love is dead and whose heart is all desolate. Who has neither thought nor wish attuned to yours. Who could bring none of the feelings or sympathies of wifehood, with its duties or its name. Who is utterly cold and utterly careless as to her fate, or yours?”

“All this I would risk so that you might be mine, Daphne.”

“You cannot love me then. It is some undesired outward gift with which nature has dowered me that you value not me.”

“It is *you* as you are, Daphne—cold or cruel, passionless, hard, what you will—it is you, the one woman in all the wide earth, who has won from her the words, ‘I love.’”

“Is that truth, signor? Do you expect my ears to credit such a thing?”

"Whether you credit it or not, it is true. There are impulses and fancies that stir a man's heart—that draw him hither and thither with vague desires and vague unrest; but they are not the goal for which his soul longs; they are not the one perfect joy that fills his whole being and sets it at rest for evermore once his ideal is reached, and safe within his arms. Of such impulses, and fancies, and mindless passions, I have had my share. All men have—why should I seek to deny it? But as for love, I have reached all these years, unknowing, uncaring for it, and now—now, Daphne, I am in a bondage death only can sever."

The girl sighed. No blush coloured her cheek; no tremor stirred her white lips, or loose clasped hands.

"That you should care so much and I—nothing," she said—a faint wonder in her tone, a faint pity in her grave beautiful eyes.

He winced perceptibly. Say what he might it hurt him to hear those calm clear tones speaking their coldness; never changing for any pleading of his, however passionate, or however sad.

"It is strange," he said. "Have you no pity for me, Daphne?"

"You would wed me after all I have said?" she asked suddenly. "Wed me after such a confession of indifference? Wed me because I seek in you refuge from my own misery—vengeance on my own weakness, and another's want of faith. Surely your love must be a veritable madness!"

"Such as it is, Daphne, it is beyond my control—it is yours to do with as you will."

"You will be worse off than now, signor, if I accept it."

"My child—my life, my joy—do you know me so little? Oh, listen, listen and believe. Whether I would or no, you have grown so dear that life without you is insupportable. I have tried to leave you—to forget you; I might as well have tried to forget I lived. Daphne, do not condemn me to such a fate again. Bear it I cannot. Your

words just now held out one tiny grain of hope; say it was not in vain—say that my tortures are over at last.”

She looked sadly down as he knelt there at her feet; his eyes wild, despairing, full of an agony that touched her to some kindred sympathy. Then she laid her hand gently on his bowed head.

“If you care to—risk it——” she said, and hesitated again.

He looked up, his face flushed beneath its olive darkness. His eyes had in them a world of incredulity, amazement, joy.

“Risk it?” he cried. “*Gioja mia!* I would risk death itself to call you mine but for one brief hour.”

The breathless, passionate words, seemed to terrify her. She drew suddenly away, as if afraid of what she had done.

“It is worse than foolish,” she said; “it is wrong—and yet—you must judge. You are the one who will suffer.”

“I care not for the suffering you inflict, Daphne, so that I may be with you always. You do not know what love like mine can bear. Then—I may hope at last?”

“Do what you please,” she said wearily, and drew her hands from the caresses of his burning lips, with a faint shudder. “Only, if you be wise, forget me and go your way.”

“I cannot; it is too late.”

“Then Heaven help you,” she said—her breath caught in a half sob—her eyes looking away from him as though in some sudden dread of what she had done. “And Heaven pity me,” she added, in a voice too low for him to hear.

Thus ended this strange betrothal.

CHAPTER IV.

“HOW SHOULD I LOVE YOU—SWEET?”

“If you were I and I were you,
How could I love you—say?
How could the rose-leaf love the rue,
The day love nightfall and her dew,
Though night may love the day?”

“For all things are not good to try,
And lifelong love the worst of these.”

SWINBURNE.

THE winter passed. In the spring they were to be wedded.

Delli was like a man mad with joy; the nearer the time came, the greater grew his intense devotion, his worshipping homage, his passionate love. He seemed to have no thought, care, wish, but of her. Out of her presence he was restless, unhappy, discontented. It seemed as if some great dread were upon him always. Some fear lest the prize he coveted might even at the last moment be snatched from his grasp.

“If she were only mine,” he would mutter often to himself as he came from her presence, or sought to console himself with the music that was now a recreation and not a labour. “Will the day never come?”

Quite early in the bright brief days of Pasqua they went to Florence.

It was beautiful there. The cold had all gone, and the balmy spring weather, with its golden noons and rosy twilights, made the earth glad with its smile.

But to Daphne it seemed all one, whether the darkness of winter, or brightness of spring reigned around her. From her life all the brightness and gladness had gone.

She was so changed.

Had I been human and had a heart, how it would have ached, remembering her as she had been, and seeing her as she was.

Always calm, but with a calmness won from ceaseless struggles; always shrinking from sound of the name she had loved, as though its bare mention struck like a knife to her heart. The very chiming of the bells, swinging in gay, sweet measure, from morn till eve on any feast-day, the laughing voices of the lovers echoing through the twilit streets, all seemed full of memories sharp as pain; and she would shudder and turn away from it all, and go back to her solitude, as if the risen ghost of her dead love were in each familiar sight and sound that met her eyes or ears.

She had one strange fancy, and that was for me. I was more often in her hands than in Delli's. She rarely sang, but she would play on and on for hours together, music like her own thoughts, sad, vague, longing; full of beauty, and full also of something that was born of pain, and like an echo of dead joys and lost happiness.

They were to go to Venice after their marriage. She had not seen the Queen of Waters, and Delli had suggested a visit there. But in all their plans and discussions she took little part, not from any maiden bashfulness, such as a happy lover would have loved to see; but simply from a perfect indifference that was utterly cold. Delli avoided noticing it, but it pained him nevertheless. How could it have been otherwise, indeed, when he loved her as he did?

"Only a few hours now, my love," he said softly, as he bade her farewell the night before their wedding-day.

She turned very pale. She was quite silent.

"Daphne," he whispered. "Only one word; say you do not regret; say you can trust me. All that lies in mortal power to do for another's happiness I will do for you. My life, say you believe me."

"You are very good to me," she said coldly; "but do not talk of happiness. How can it smile on a union like

ours? Have I nothing to reproach myself with, even if you have not?"

His brow darkened.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that I am about to commit what is in my eyes a crime—to vow false vows, to give false promises. To-night, even more than ever, my heart calls out against my act. Francesco, it is not too late—yet. Think well of what lies before you in the future. How can you expect happiness with me?"

"I am content to risk that, Daphne."

"If you care for me—so much," she said sadly; "if——"

"Care?"—he interrupted passionately. "You are more than life to me. Do not talk of going back, Daphne. If you take back your promise now, you take my life as surely as though you had slain me at your feet. I need not go far to seek death," he added, with a glance of terrible meaning at the gleaming waters of the Arno, as it ran like a silver ribbon through the broad, green plains below.

She shivered, as with sudden fear.

"That were a double sin," she said in a low, troubled voice. "Oh, Francesco, why do you love me so?"

"Heaven knows!" he answered, looking at her with dim, soft eyes that mirrored his heart's longings and desires only too faithfully. "I cannot help it."

Her glance met his with no answering passion; only a great pity and a greater woe. She was silent. He came nearer, and took her hands in his, and pressed long, tender kisses on them; her lips he had not dared to touch—yet.

The night had fallen, the moonlight lay white and silvery over the distant river, and the quiet city. The thrill of a mandoline came softly through the still, soft air, as if some lover touched it in a tender serenade. It was a night for dreams—for love;—all was shadowy, dim, perfect! Beside them great clusters of roses twined, and the snowy globes of the half-opened magnolia-flowers made the air sweet as the breath of Paradise.

The great stars shone in the clear blue of the sky; a

flood of moonlight quivered in tremulous radiance over the dark hills, the sloping meadows, the sleeping city.

It was all so fair, so exquisite, and they stood there side by side, looking at it all. Lovers!—yet with no love words falling and answering from heart to heart; no kisses resting on close-pressed lips. Lovers!—and in the heart of one was an anguish bitter as death, and in the other a fear that was all torture, even in such an hour as this.

CHAPTER V.

THEIR BRIDAL.

“You are crueller—you that we love,
Than hatred, or hunger, or death;
You have eyes and breasts like a dove,
And you kill men’s hearts with a breath.”

Satia de Sanguine.

It was early—scarce five o’clock in the morning—when Daphne rose.

She thrust her feet in slippers, and threw some loose white robe around her, and went to the window and leaned out. The air was cold and fresh, balmy as summer, though it was early spring. She drank in its coolness, as if fevered with thirst. Her cheeks were flushed, her lovely hair fell round her like a mantle; her eyes were dewy and lustrous, as if some happy dream had lit them with remembered gladness. Perhaps in its memory she had forgotten that this day was the last of her brief maiden life.

One must be very old, or very sad, not to feel some stir of delight in the beauty of a spring dawn in Italy. A flood of sunlight swept the shadows from the sky; its soft sea-blue gleamed without cloud; only a few white snowy vapours floated over the distant hills, where the rosy flush of the Apennines shone in the sun-rays.

Everywhere the light came; glowing, flooding, transmuting as with an alchemist's magic, the towers and bridges of the city, and the purple shadows of the lower belt of mountains, until all were bathed in liquid golden fire, through which the pearly water gleamed like snow.

The trees stirred, the fragrance of dew-washed blossoms floated up through the dim cool air. There was an endless murmur of twittering songs and rustling wings from the waking birds, while around all human life slept, and was still.

But the girl's eyes lost their dreamy radiance as she gazed. The loveliness around had no spell to bind her senses in forgetfulness.

She turned from the open casement with a sob of agony.

"Oh, God," she cried, "almost I had forgotten!"

She did not say what—there was no need. Everywhere around her dainty chamber were traces of the change in store for her. Jewels, laces, satins, packing-cases ready for departure; her bridal robes ready for her wearing. Sadly, despairingly she looked on it all.

"Oh, Heaven give me strength!" she cried, falling on her knees, and weeping tears which were wrung from her burning eyes and aching heart by no mere woman's weakness. "How shall I bear my life from this day forward? I thought I should have forgotten long ere this, and yet memory is as keen as ever. Every one of those old sweet days are with me still; the scents of vines, the magnolia breaths on any moonlit night, the sight of an iris lily in its grassy nook, the familiar strain of some lay that falls from a passing lute—all are beset with this same madness; a memory that is worse than death; for death comes but once, and these—always! Oh, what is it that is with me still? Love—no, that it cannot be. Love for one who could so soon forget; who holds me no dearer than a dancing-girl upon some mimic stage. For very shame sake my love must be dead; only—it is a death so long—so long."

And thus it was she greeted her wedding-morn.

To a woman who weds without love, marriage is indeed a bondage terrible to bear.

Daphne had no mother or sister, no woman friend even to be with her, or near her. She was quite alone in her sorrow and her suffering; quite alone and comfortless.

White as any statue; cold and calm, and passionless, she moved and spoke, and did what they bade her; and only when the long ceremony ended, and on her slender finger he saw the symbol of wifehood gleam, did a sign of emotion escape her. Then a look of horror filled her eyes, a shudder shook her from head to foot.

But it passed. A strong effort of self-control forced back the waves of memory from the barrier of pride. She was once more calm and still.

"May Heaven bless you, my child," her father whispered, with some real emotion in his voice, as he bade her farewell. "If love and devotion can make you happy, you will not lack them, I am sure. No bride was ever more beloved than you."

She said nothing. She only clung to him with a mute, despairing tenderness that surprised and pleased him both in one, for he knew how undemonstrative she usually was.

Then he loosed her arms, and gave her to her husband and with a proud satisfied smile, saw her depart.

They halted in the cool of the evening at some lonely quiet little village—not of any note or importance, but beautiful exceedingly with woods and thickets sloping to a tiny lake, and groves of orange-trees and myrtles, and a wilderness of roses everywhere, and one or two white villas dotted here and there, sought only by summer idlers, or wedded lovers like themselves.

Everything was ready for their reception. Though they were to spend but one day there, he had had the villa beautified and made as dainty and homelike as possible. It would have been like an idyl of Paradise had she but loved him as she was loved. But she did not, and he knew it.

* * * * *

They had dined, and he dismissed the servants, and drew the table up to the open window with its dainty burden of ripe fruits, and gleaming crystal, and rich sparkling wines.

The beautiful grounds lay before them, sloping down to the tiny fairy-like lake. One by one the stars came gleaming out of the dim blue of the sky. A faint breeze stirred the leaves of the trees, and carried the scents of the closing flowers through the open windows. All was hushed, calm, dreamy. The noise, and fret, and sorrows of life, seemed as things apart from existence here. There was only a sense of infinite beauty, of infinite peace. They gazed on it, both silent.

On his face was all the longing and languor, the abandonment of an intense and passionate love—a love that seemed to say, “Let earth fade, or heaven perish, only from *her* let my life be never parted more.” On hers was a touch of softness it had not worn the whole day through, a faint yearning and regret as for some joy she might have had, and now looked sadly back upon, knowing it could never be hers. But she was brave and womanly; and, having taken upon herself this new life, was resolved to bear it with such resignation and fortitude as she could summon. Be its torture ever so great she would still have borne it uncomplainingly, and if possible have hid it from her husband’s eyes, once having given herself to him. But as yet the battle was only being fought; it was not won.

His voice broke the stillness at last.

“Daphne,” he said, “I have something to say to you.”

She looked up. Her cheeks grew a little paler.

“Yes,” she said inquiringly.

“Ours is a strange union,” he went on hurriedly. “I cannot, dare not greet you as a man would, who knows his wife’s heart is entirely, surely his own. I have told you so often how I love you, Daphne, that the tale is no new thing to your ears. I will not repeat it now, though every fibre of my being thrills with longing and delight as I look on you, and know at last I have won to myself the sole

thing that my heart has ever coveted. But it is just this of which I must speak. I have won you, yes; but what is it I have won? a casket without a jewel; the setting of the gem, but not the gem itself. Nay, do not speak; I do not blame you; the fault is none of yours. Hitherto I have told you only of my love; perhaps you are wearied, heart-sick, tired of it all? It is my punishment, and I will not complain against it. My darling, you are so young yet; your years but number half my own, and patience and forbearance are hard lessons for youth to learn; time alone can teach them. Once you told me—do you remember?—that it was not you I cared for, it was your beauty. Those words I have never forgotten, though by you, doubtless, they are no longer remembered. You have said many hard things to me, Daphne, but never anything that hurt me so much as that; and why? Because for once I knew your words were false and unfounded. This is the reason why I now speak of them. When a man loves a woman for her beauty only, he loves with the worst and lowest instincts of his nature. It is only when some higher chord is touched, some purer sympathy awakened, that love becomes exalted, purified, divine. Were you to lose your personal loveliness, were you sightless, infirm, stricken by disease, yet none the less should I love you; none the less would you be for me the one woman in the world. To say I do not value your beauty would be a lie. No one—least of all, any man who cares for you—can look on you and not see how fair you are; but Daphne, I would rather have your love than your loveliness a thousand times. Do you believe it?"

She looked away; a faint flush coloured her cheeks; and the first sign of embarrassment he had ever raised, now showed itself in that troubled silence, that feverish flush.

He left his seat. He came and knelt beside her in the moonlight, drawing both her hands in his, and turning her face towards him as he spoke,—

"Listen," he said; "only to look at you and touch you,

Daphne, makes my heart throb with the deepest joy it has ever known. Only to see you here and know you are mine, and that no earthly power can take you from me, is a joy that makes my brain reel as I dwell upon its meaning; and yet"—he drew a long breath; for one instant he paused as if for strength to say the words he wished—"and yet, Daphne, now that you are mine, I will not force one caress, one endearment, even one word of the love you know is ever on my lips, upon you, until—until *you* yourself wish it. I have won you, yes; but even in the very fulfilment of my hopes, I know that the mere fact of winning you is nought to me, unless with you comes also—your love."

She drew her hands away. She looked at him in a surprise that was almost anger.

"You know *that* was no part of our bargain," she said.

"Heaven help me! I did know it," he answered, with a half-despair in his sad and tender voice; "knew it, and yet had not strength to renounce you."

"Then why ask for what is impossible?"

"Will it always be impossible, my beloved?" he asked, with a passion in his eyes and voice that might have moved any woman. "Why should I not win your heart even as I have won you—by patience and by force of my own great love? Why should I not, as I learn to know you better, learn also the key to that pure, proud heart of yours, for whose sake I have endured and can endure so much? To most husbands, marriage closes the gates of love upon the serenity and contentment of possession. To me, it bars the way to the joys I crave, because they are not free gifts, and aught else is abhorrent to me—now. Oh, my love, when you see how patient I can be, when you know how utterly and entirely I love you, and yet deny myself all outward expression of that love, surely you will grow less cold—surely you will think of me more kindly, and so seeing how I too can suffer and endure, (in a silence that you must feel is torture), turn to me, and lay your hand in mine, and say, 'I am your wife—at last.'"

She met his eyes, and her own fell before the passion and the ardour of his gaze. Certainly Delli had gone the right way to work at last. She was more nearly won than she herself knew. For a man has but to renounce, and a woman will regret—has but to withdraw, and she will long to advance; and a love held by some tenure of insecurity is the love she will most value, and most desire.

He knelt still at her feet, the beautiful Florentine face, the graceful form, all taking a subtle strange attraction from the surroundings of the scene, the mingled emotions at war within her breast, the strange feeling—half gladness, half relief, half fear—that had come to her with his words.

Hers, and not hers, so he had said. He renounced her until her own heart should lead her to his arms; until not cold duty, but timid love, should teach her the lesson she deemed impossible to learn. At that moment she cared for him more than she believed possible. She answered him with a strange shy gentleness that tasked all his efforts at self-command.

"You have been very good to me always," she said; "but I cannot love you. I do not think it is in me to love any man again."

"I will be patient and try my best. I have married you—true; but now I set myself the task of winning what most men would deem won. Am I very bold or very sanguine when I let a hope creep into my longing heart—a hope that a day will come when in very truth and reality you will be—my wife?"

His voice lingered over those words with an infinite tenderness; his face, looking up to hers, was nobler, manlier now in this hour of longing and renunciation than ever it had been in any love-frenzied moment of his wooing. It was so white, so sad, so sorrowful, as the moonrays fell upon it, that her eyes grew dim with sudden tears as she met his own.

"How you must love me," she said involuntarily.

"God knows I do," he murmured in broken passionate words; "oh, love, if I have sinned to win you, I suffer now."

She scarcely heeded his words, she deemed him only guilty of too great a love. She did not know that that love had been stained by falsehood, blackened by treachery. If she had—

* * * *

For some moments he knelt there beside her. His face bowed on her hands, his whole frame trembling with agitation.

She rose at last, and tried to withdraw her hands from that strong clinging pressure. Drawn up to her full height, the silvery moonbeams playing on her rich hair, her lovely troubled eyes, she stood looking down at the trembling figure at her feet.

"Our marriage is an error," she said softly, regretfully. "I told you it would be so; but if you are generous enough to forego self and trust me, at least the error may be less a crime in my eyes, and in Heaven's, than it seemed even an hour ago."

"I will trust you while I live," he said earnestly; "and if it be in human power to win love, I shall yet win yours."

He stood beside her. The history of his love was written on his face—its intensity, its unrest, its control—sit longing for all he had a right to claim and dared not—for the touch of the lips that never yet had met and trembled on his own—for the sweet reluctant joy that her words had never confessed in any hour of love's abandonment—for the clasp of warm soft hands, for the answering throb of heart to heart, in some sweet silent embrace to which love gave right and gladness—for the bliss, and peace, and contentment of a love that knows it is only giving what is given back, and feels its heaven of joy can be entered by a glance, a kiss, a touch.

He looked and looked; at her troubled face that had

lost its calm—at her drooping eyes that could not bear his own long yearning gaze—and all his thoughts stirred in wilder tumult, and his pulses beat with feverish speed. The task he had set himself was harder than he had deemed it would be.

Suddenly he drew her in his arms, and bent his head over the drooping graceful form.

“Kiss me, love—just once,” he said with an imploring cry that had more of terror than desire. “Kiss me—or let me die, for love like this is death!”

She drew herself swiftly from his arms; then, as if fearful of the agony she inflicted, she suddenly stooped towards him and let her lips touch his own. It was a caress scarce worthy of the name; light as the fall of a rose-leaf, swift as the flight of a bird’s wing. But, slight as it was, it filled his whole heart with rapture; it gave to his face a joy that words cannot paint. Forgetful of his promises, his struggles, he sought to detain her still, as blushing half with anger, half with shame, she sought to pass from the room.

“Not yet—not yet?” he implored.

She turned gravely towards him, her eyes calm and rebuking once more.

“Is it *thus* you keep your promise?” she said.

He dropped her hand; a quiver of emotion passed over his face.

“Forgive me,” he said; and before he could move a step towards her, she had opened the door, and so passed from his presence.

He went out into the quiet, beautiful grounds, and through the orange groves, and so on to where the liquid darkness of the lake gleamed beneath the stars.

Perhaps in the solitude and beauty of the night he began to learn the first page of the lesson he had set himself. Perhaps in his remorse for the suffering his hand had dealt her, he dealt in some measure a kindred suffering to himself. For being a man of strong passions and fierce impulses, and accustomed to no control and no denial

of anything on which his heart was set, his task was doubly hard. Yet—as he had said—he had learnt at last that to win a woman who is utterly cold and utterly loveless is torture greater than to lose one on whom a man's heart is set. It is as the ashes of a fire—grey and cold and colourless; as the beauty of a flower that has no fragrance—a bird that has no song.

CHAPTER VI

"CAN LOVE COME TWICE?"

Yea, now do I bid you love me, love
Love me or loathe, we are one, not twain
But God be praised in His heaven above
For this my pleasure—and that my pain."

Les Noyades.

IT was in the full flush and beauty of May—that sweetest month of all the year—and the water-streets of Venice were echoing with the songs of the boatmen, and the laughter and babbling voices of women and children idling and dancing on the canal banks, and over all the land lay the blossoming loveliness of coming summer.

They had wandered lazily on, Daphne and Delli, staying here and there, wherever any beauty or grace of scenery charmed her eyes, or any fancy seized her for rest and quiet. Every wish of hers was law to him, and yet there was a subtle change in his manner that seemed at times to surprise her. His graceful courtesy was often more cold than love-like; her hours of solitude he never attempted to disturb. The intense passion and the almost worshipping love, of whose display she had once wearied and sickened, now never escaped his vigilant guard. But then, on the other hand, he never so much as touched her

hand if it were possible to avoid doing so; he never met her eyes without instantly withdrawing his own, as if he feared a long or lingering glance would betray his weakness.

But all that courtesy, gentleness, patience, attention could do, he did for her. His powers of mind were taxed for her amusement or gratification. Those resources of conversation which had charmed her in her girlhood were again displayed with a skill and tact which could not fail to charm her again; and the cynicism and mockery which had once lent their false brilliance to his views of men and things began gradually to disappear. It may have been the effects of her influence that, unknown to either of them, was working a gradual change upon his nature or character; it may have been that his love was ennobling him; and the constant effort at self-restraint, the constant endeavour to please her only, without regard to his own wishes or feelings, made him forget those very opinions he had once gloried in adopting. It may be; I cannot tell.

By her wish too, he had again resumed his music, and what he wrote now was far above any previous efforts.

"You need not be an executant except from choice," she said to him once; "but if you have a talent, is it well to hide it?"

"And what about yours?" he said, smiling.

"I sing still."

"Yes; a nightingale caged for one ear only to hear. Tell me, Daphne, would you care for more society? would you like to mix with the world? It must be so dull for you, I fear."

"I have not found it so yet," she said quietly.

A flush of pleasure rose to his face.

"You are paying me a very high compliment in saying so."

"I am only speaking the truth. It would be ungrateful to deny it, when you have devoted so much of your time to my sole amusement and gratification."

"If I have given you one hour's pleasure my time has been well spent," he said earnestly.

She laid her hand on his.

"Not only hours, but days—weeks—more than I thought it possible for any human being to give me; certainly more than I ever deemed myself capable of appreciating."

"Daphne," he said, and looked into her eyes as he had not looked since that strange wedding-eve when he had set himself the task of winning her heart.

Her colour rose. She withdrew her hand hurriedly.

"I forgot," she said.

The words recalled him to his own calm self.

"I have some friends in Venice who would be glad to know you," he went on presently. "They only arrived yesterday. I met them in the Piazza San Marco this morning. Like us they are newly wedded. The Contessa Lorenza is a very charming woman."

Daphne blushed faintly.

"Are they coming here?" she asked.

"If you wish."

"It is always as I wish," she said pettishly. "Have you no right to assert your own desires—your own wishes?"

"Not till—my wife—gives it to me."

"Are they happy, these friends of yours?" she asked hurriedly, and looking away from the dark grave eyes that sought her own.

"Very. They love each other devotedly."

Daphne sighed.

"Then they must be happy," she said.

Her words stung him with sudden reproach.

"Daphne," he said, "am I still as indifferent to you as ever? Is your heart still obdurate?"

She looked down. Her cheeks grew white. The slender interlaced fingers trembled nervously.

"Is your patience exhausted?" she asked softly.

"No—for my love is limitless."

"You never speak of it now," she said impatiently, with quick petulance in her voice that made the reproach sweet to his ears.

"Why speak of what is unwelcome?" he said with well-assumed coldness.

She looked at him in surprise, then looked away.

"You are weary of the task you set yourself, then?"

"You make it so hopeless, Daphne. When I see others——"

"You regret our marriage? I knew it would be so," she cried, flushing and paling with the conflict raging in her breast. "Oh, why—why did you not believe me? It is too late now—too late to go back—too late for repentance, even; we are both fettered to this cheerless bondage—both rebellious against our self-enforced misery. Better, a thousand times, that I had never married you—I wonder you do not hate me!"

He bent his head to conceal the flush of triumph in his face, the light of hope in his eyes.

"Hate you!" he said. "Would you be glad if I did?"

"It would not matter. Nothing matters to me now. Oh, why was I born, to be so utterly wretched?"

The misery in her voice unmanned him. He could not see her unhappy, and preserve his mask of composure.

"Are you so wretched?" he cried with a painful entreaty in his yearning voice. "Oh, my love, what can I do? I who would lay down my life for your sake!"

"Do you love me still?" she asked in surprise. "I thought—I mean it seemed——"

"Not that I had ceased to love you? Daphne, when will you learn to read my heart aright. Have I played my part so well, that you deemed my assumption of coldness—real. My beloved, do you not know that if I did not speak of love it was only because I did not dare. If I gave way to the torrent of feeling I have penned within my breast, nothing can stay its progress. If I but touch your hand, meet your eyes, self-restraint becomes well nigh impossible! Daphne, if you have any pity in your heart, pity me now; indeed you do not know how much I need it. When I saw those two to-day—lovers wedded—one in heart and soul and sympathy—happy only,

because life held for them the perfect bliss contained in that one word—*together*—Oh, Daphne, to contrast such a fate with mine! I, who love you with an all-mastering passion that requires every power of will to curb; I who, calling you wife, am yet to you no more than the merest stranger that touches your hand and looks upon your face. When, I say, I thought of this my fate, I for once wished myself dead, and done with the bitterness of life for ever!”

The passionate torrent of his rapid words held her breathless and spellbound. For long she had heard no such words, and the intense love breathing through them came fresh and new, and with a strange gladness that surprised herself, to her heart.

He stood up before her, his tall figure shaken and trembling with the storm of feeling he had at last let loose: his face lit up with the fire that so long he had kept in check, and that now revenged itself, whether he would or no, by bursting into every look, and word, and action.

“Are you a woman,” he said, “and can you be so pitiless, so cold? What has your boy-lover done for you compared with all I have done, and borne, and suffered? Is it to the faithless only that your heart is faithful? Have you no softer thought, no tenderer feeling for me than you had?”

She drew a step back. Her head dropped, her colour changed.

“I—I do not know,” she murmured, and trembled from head to foot. She was frightened at herself; frightened, too, because the coldness and self-command, once so natural, would not come at her bidding.

“You do not know?” he said, and bent down and looked into the lovely, troubled eyes and drooping face, so close to his own, as the soft shadows fell around them. “Do you hate me—still?” he said, with soft insistence.

She tried to draw away; a tumult of pain and pleasure, and yet of anger at her own weakness, was in her heart, and its heavy throbs beat audibly upon the stillness, as he leaned over her in his great longing, and his intense dread of the answer he sought.

"I never—hated—you— ." she faltered slowly at last.
"Only—"

"Only you do not love?"

She was silent.

"Love!" she said at last, softly and shyly; "can it come—twice?"

"That you can ask such a question, is in itself hope, Daphne."

Her eyes drooped; her breath came fast and loud. She pressed her hands against her beating heart.

"I did not mean to give you pain," she said. "You are far too good; I have been selfish, exacting. I——"

"Daphne, Daphne, do you wish me to go mad with joy? do you know what your words mean to me?"

She drew herself away from his arms. She was white as death; every limb trembled, as though with the cold of night.

"I am—afraid——" she said.

"Of me, my love, my life?"

She looked into his face. A flush of colour and radiance came into her own.

"Of you?—no," she said, in a voice low and sweet as music itself. "Of *myself*."

And as he heard the words his strength forsook him. Pain, sorrow, denial, he had borne so long, so patiently; but hope like this!—it made his brain reel, his senses flee. With a sob that was almost agony in its rapture and its glad relief, he fell at her feet; weeping, as the weakest woman might weep, in the madness of a joy restored.

She bent down to him. Her eyes were wet, and shone like stars through the veil of their drooping lashes.

"Hush!" she entreated. "Do not weep so. It terrifies me. Listen, while I try to tell you what has changed me."

He knelt there still, his face hidden in the folds of her soft white dress; a stormy sob shaking his strong frame ever and anon, as her sweet voice stole upon his ear.

"I thought I should never care for you," she said;

"perhaps I never should, had your conduct not placed before my eyes the contrast between the two loves I have gained—had the truth, and strength, and patience of the one not forced me to see at last the weakness and faithlessness of the other. But—how you tremble! Nay, I will not pain you more. For long a struggle has been going on within my breast, unknown almost to myself. To-night——"

She paused. He looked up, and the joy and bewilderment in his face abashed her. She moved aside. The colour burned in her cheeks in a sudden hot flame.

"Go on," he entreated, as if incredulous of the gladness that each word brought.

"To-night," she said shyly, as her voice grew faint, and a sort of shame wavered over the beautiful, troubled face, "your words made me more glad than I thought to be at sound of any words of love again. Does it seem base, weak, unwomanly to confess so much? For, indeed, I feared I had lost your love, too."

"My own beloved," he murmured passionately, "is not this some dream mocking me? Are you indeed owning that I am not indifferent to you at last—that your heart turns to mine with some of the tenderness I have craved so long—have despaired of so often?"

"I cannot tell," she murmured softly. "Only, if you love me still——"

"Look in my eyes and read my heart," he cried, in a voice whose music stirred her own, whose infinite love carried conviction in its low and passion-fraught entreaty.

She obeyed.

As her gaze met his—reading all the eloquence of a deathless love, the agony of an ended struggle, the rapture and the gladness, the passion and the pain, that one by one swept in stormy charges over his wildly beating heart, and spoke in love's own voiceless language to her own—a deep, dreamful delight stole over her face. Rest, peace, content—all seemed to seal her troubled heart, and bring it rest at last. It was not love answering love, as it had

once answered it, when her young lover wooed her in the careless, untroubled days of girlhood. It was rather the restless craving of a woman's nature for some stronger one on which to lean; some longing for the shelter, and contentment, and unfailing tenderness of a love too deep and true to change. It was as if she had said, "Since I cannot gain what I would, I will take what I have gained." As if the long struggle had wearied and weakened her so utterly, that she craved for shelter and rest at last.

That long silent gaze was like the revealing of a history to both. There was no need of words, and they uttered none. Slowly he rose to his feet. He stretched his arms longingly to her.

"Will you come to me—now?" he said.

For a single instant she hesitated. Then—she laid her drooping head upon his breast. In the silent shadowy dusk I could see his arms enfold her, while all her loveliness seemed to melt into that long embrace, and his lips at last rested unrebuked upon her own.

* * * * *

An hour later, and Delli paced the room alone. His face troubled in all its gladness; his brow dark with pain, and drawn with lines of suffering.

"Won at last!" he said; but his voice had no triumph in its intense gladness now. "Won; but, oh, Heaven, if she ever knows——"

Knows what? To me it seemed that some hidden terror lurked in his heart, robbing it of its gladness; filling it with remorse even in this the hour of the sweetest, fullest joy his life had ever known.

"She trusts me so utterly," he went on presently, as with bent head he paced the silent room. "And every word is torture, and every look reproach. My paradise of joy is gained; but even as I enter it, terror seizes me, a deadly fear chills my heart. To lose her love—now it is so nearly gained! What doom could be more terrible?"

He stood quite still. His face dark with that sleepless dread that would never leave him again in any hour of joy however great—in any day of the years to come, that her love seemed now to glorify.

Surely men need no surer Nemesis to avenge their own evil deeds, than the fruits those deeds produce.

In that shadowy, beautiful chamber, for ever sacred to his memory by the scene so recently enacted, he paced restlessly to and fro, with a heart heavy with unspeakable dread—a dread that would haunt him now his whole life through; that would never leave him with the rising of any sun, with the close of any day.

The very purity of her trust in him was as a dagger thrust to his heart. She had exalted him so high; it was that very height which terrified him now. For he knew—and I knew it too, at last—that so much greater would be the fall, when that fall should come!

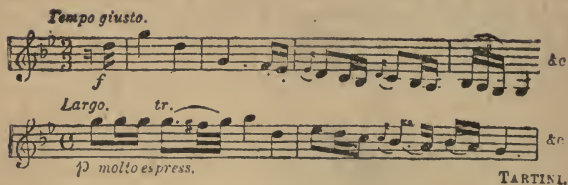
And would it!

BOOK VIII.

LACRIMOSO.

CHAPTER I.

THE AMATI'S STORY.

The Devil's Trill.

A DARK, cheerless winter night.

The wild day was sobbing itself to sleep; a curtain of shadows had descended, and the sky stretched gloomy and starless over the cathedral spires, and clustering roofs of Paris.

In the dense obscurity of one of the poorest streets—in a place where men and women at the lowest ebb of life, in the lowest depths of misery, crowded and gathered together—a youth lay dying of fever. He was quite alone, and quite unknown. He had come to this dreary refuge, where only misery and squalor ever came, and none had asked him any questions, or troubled themselves about him, save to wonder languidly that he should choose the topmost nook of that high desolate tower for his own

abode, when it was far colder, drearier, and more dilapidated even than the wretched rooms below. But when individual misery lies heavy upon individual life, there is scarce space for curiosity; and the weight of toil, the pangs of hunger, the utter dreary blank of poverty and suffering, were all for which they lived in this most desolate place.

Life was very terrible there.

It was terrible to see the gaunt frames of men, lean and bony with famine; the thin starved women, with babies at their empty breasts; the white-faced girls with eyes half blind from the strain of needlework, or lace-weaving; the little tottering children, to whom existence meant nought but want and toil, and who staggered with weak limbs to the furnaces, or wheels, or factories where they were employed from dawn to dusk. It was all very terrible; it would have made any heart sad to see; any heart that was at all pitiful, or at all kind. But none of the great, or rich, or important members of the great city, knew anything about these outcasts; they were ostracised from all that was bright, or glad, or joyful in life, dragging on an existence that had no charm, and kept alive, so it seemed, by a supreme faculty for suffering, which was the only gift humanity bestowed on them.

And thither Tista had come, and I.

Poverty had dragged him down step by step. Despair had fastened on his soul. He felt his life was gradually becoming a thing apart from human interest, and human sympathy. No one heeded, no one wanted him, a unit amongst the millions of a great city, what was he to claim its notice, or force its hearing? And it is so easy, so terribly easy, to sink by stages lower and lower into the depths of misery, crushed by the iron hand of need, pushed aside into the darkness of oblivion by the greedy, restless, striving crowd, who have ears and eyes only for themselves, and those who minister to their necessities.

Such was Tista's fate now.

There had come a day when even the few coins necessary

to pay for his humble lodging had been impossible to obtain—when in the bitterness of shame and self-abasement, he had fled away, taking me with him. Together we had roamed the gas-lighted streets of Paris, lost in a world of tumult, colour, noise, riot, utterly alone amidst that vast multitude, seeming like things apart from the laughter and revelry that sounded everywhere, but were in his ears hideous as a nightmare.

So wandering he had come to one of the theatres, where a crowd was clamouring and besieging the entrance-doors. He was swept on with its advance, whether he would or no; hands from behind him threw down money at the barriers.

Before he was aware of it he found himself in the crowded gallery, hemmed in on all sides by men and women.

He sat there like one dazed—the lights—the crowd—the music—all bewildered and confused his senses.

Presently there was silence. The orchestra began to play the overture to a new opera—this was its first night of performance. As the opening bars sounded, Tista sprang to his feet; his face death-like, his eyes incredulous.

Phrase after phrase—melody after melody—all rose in strange familiar cadences and floated to his ears.

“What is this?” he asked hoarsely of a woman who sat beside him with a printed programme in her hand.

“Voyez, monsieur,” she said, and handed him the paper.

He looked at it. The name of the opera was strange to him, but the name of the composer was that of a man to whom he had submitted his own score, and who, after retaining it for many weeks, returned it as useless.

Yet cunningly interwoven into the man’s own work were the very themes, the beautiful fancies and ideas of Tista’s brain—choruses, solos, recitatives, all came back to him now, stolen from himself, openly produced and given to the world as the composition of another.

With the close of the first act a thunder of applause rent the building.

“He has never written anything so good,” the people

cried, and so crying, clamoured and shouted for the composer to appear.

Then Tista's self-command gave way. He sprang on the seat, his slight figure towering over the crowd around.

"It is mine!" he cried. "All mine—and he has stolen it!"

And while from his box below the successful pirate bowed and smiled in answer to the rapturous acclamations which gave his name to fame thenceforward, he to whom of right such fame belonged, fell like a stone down, among the wondering mass who had heard his words and deemed him mad. They took him up and bore him out as one dead.

"Poor boy," said the pitying voice of the woman who had given him the play-bill. "Doubtless he is crazed. Did you see how wild he looked? and he had a violin, too, under his arm all the time. Some street-player, doubtless!"

And then the curtain drew up once more, and they turned their attention to the stage.

From that hour Tista was changed. He did not die—not so far as his body was concerned; but the life in his soul and brain were all killed from that moment. Of what use to labour, when to others belonged the triumphs—to him the suffering.

None would have believed him, even had he denounced the thief. What could his word weigh against a name successful, honoured, great. For difficult it may be to attain a name; but once gained, one triumph can stretch over a lifetime if the man be wise in his generation, and utterly devoid of all principle and of all shame!

Do my words seem hard?

Yet none the less are they true; none the less is the case I have cited a case which is not too uncommon, though the world affect to believe it so.

Thus it came to pass that Tista lay dying of fever and starvation in a dismal garret, while the man who had not been above the meanness of treachery, and the baseness of deceit, drove his carriage through the glittering streets, and gathered a harvest of laurels for his future, and smiled

in well-pleased content, thinking none knew of the wrong he had committed! And none did, save Tista and I; and I being voiceless, could never blazon forth his shame, and Tista—Tista lay moaning and tossing in senseless delirium, with the ghastliness of destitution surrounding him on every side.

Thus it is that the world adjudges merit. Thus it is, that the genius which has naught wherewith to bribe a hearing can see mediocrity ride rough-shod over its head, crying aloud—

“Behold, am I not stronger than you? Oh, fool—fool! Do you need to learn that he who is wise to himself alone, holds the only wisdom that men honour, for the greatness of a man is only measured by what he *gains*, not by what he does!”

* * * * *

It was close upon midnight. Tista lay as he had lain all day, in the dull stupor of suffering, broken only by occasional fits of restlessness. Close to the hard narrow pallet he had placed me, though for days his fingers had been too weak to play.

The wind shook the shattered window and sighed mournfully around the dismal place; fitful storms beat against the broken pains and dashed themselves across the bare rough floor. He had fallen asleep at last. His breathing grew quieter. The fever-flush died off his face. The sunken cheeks—the hollow temples—the eyes, with those dark shadows under their closed lids, all told their own sad tale—all spoke the story of his life's struggle, with an eloquence more pitiful than any words.

There came the sound of a closing door in the stillness that had fallen with his slumbers; a woman's figure, with a step noiseless as a phantom's, glided up the dark shaft of the stairs and entered the room. By the flickering light of the dull oil-lamp she saw the motionless form stretched there in the shadows. A quick, gasping breath left her

lips. Swift as thought she came and knelt by his side, gazing at the sleeping face with such wonder, and joy, and gladness in her eyes, as spoke out her heart's relief.

"Found—at last!" she murmured, and a heavy rain of tears fell from her eyes—her face grew white as his own.

He moved suddenly, and she drew hastily back into the shadows.

His feeble hands groped as if in search for me. He sat up and placed me in the old accustomed position.

He was asleep; his eyes were fast closed, but his brain was awake and restless.

Softly the music fell from the strings, quivering like a pleading voice. I knew what he played, though for so long I had not heard it. It was his love-song to Daphne.

It seemed to bring back all the lovely quiet scene—the murmurs of the stream—the fall of the rose petals—the breath of the summer air—the gleam of the tremulous moonlight.

His face grew radiant as he played; then, quite suddenly, the music ceased—a sigh burst from his parched and fevered lips.

"A great lady!" he cried; "never my Daphne again!"

And he sank back on his pillow, and was still once more.

The girl beside him approached again. She threw off her long shrouding cloak, and revealed to me the face and figure of Nita. Very troubled and sorrowful was the bright *riante* face of the pretty singer, and something more even than sorrow was in the wide dark eyes now, as she bent over the sleeper.

"Daphne," she murmured softly, "who is she?" And the stir of jealousy was in her quick-caught breath—her troubled face.

"How ill he looks!" she presently resumed. "How could he have kept me in ignorance of his sufferings so long?"

Her eyes took in all the misery and wretchedness around as she knelt silently there, waiting till he should awake.

The hours passed, the midnight changed to dawn, the day broke in gloom and storm, with masses of dark clouds tossed hither and thither, and fierce gusts of wind and showers, and a clamour of bells from many steeples in strange bursts of jangled sound.

An old man peered in through the ill-fastened door, and came up to her with a ghastly leer.

"What are you to him?" he asked.

She looked up, surprised and startled.

"I am a friend. I have sought him for long," she answered hurriedly.

He grinned in her eyes.

"You have money. Is it so? He owes me much, and there is only that wooden toy that makes his music to pay me. I came to fetch it now. It is so seldom he sleeps."

The girl turned on him in sudden fury; her whole frame shook.

"Touch it if you dare!" she cried. "Would you rob him of his only joy while he is helpless to defend it?" The man stared at her in surprise.

"He can make no use of it now," he said. "He will be dead soon; I marvel he has lived so long. He has starved in here. No living creature has been near him. It was a hard life to bear, and he so young, too!"

She was silent. Her heart ached with misery for him, perchance too for herself, seeing that in absence and solitude and neglect she had found it impossible to forget him—and remembrance meant so much to her.

"He must be tired of life," the old man went on. "Always alone, and hungered and wretched; playing beautiful things that one would think the world out there might have been glad to hear and possess, and yet—unknown of any one."

Her eyes swept over the prostrate figure, reading so plainly the story of its short sad life—the story of continual failure.

"Well, well," the old man muttered, turning away at last. "If you be a friend as you say, you come too late

for help. But I will trust to you to pay me what he owes, and if it be any pleasure for him to have his wooden toy, it may stop there; it won't be for long!"

A shiver ran through the girl's slight frame.

"Are you human at all," she said, "and can talk thus of a fellow-creature? You would let him starve and die, and rob him even in his helplessness and extremity!"

He chuckled maliciously.

"Well, what would you? A debt is a debt, and I must live too!"

Then he went away through the dull black shadows, and left her alone with the unconscious sleeper.

She sank down again by his side. She took her own thick mantle with its lining of fur, and threw it over his shivering form.

"To die thus," she murmured, "young, gifted as he is. To die thus, and for want of a little pity, a little gold!"

He moved his head uneasily on his hard pillow, his lips began to mutter unconscious words, the thoughts of his troubled brain.

"All mine—it was all mine," he said. "He stole it from me note by note. Shall I denounce him? Ah! of what use? None would believe—none would believe! It is not the gold—no!—but for once, just once, to have my name on men's lips—to know that some poor triumph had rewarded my long labours—it would have made me happy—as happy as I can be made. . . . A Christian city! Ah, dear Heaven! A city that robs men's brains, and devours men's lives; and when one has dreams of beauty, mocks them; and when one would teach them of life that is immortal, cries only, 'Give us the life that is pleasure and sin, even if its end be—death!' Oh fool, fool, to tune your lyre to other praise than that of gold—to barter the rod of wealth for the bitterness of a crown of laurel. . . . Laurels—they are Daphne's emblem—Daphne! Ah, Love, too, has forsaken me, for his wings are clipped by a golden shears, and he can no more soar above the world's laws of restraint. A great lady—a great

lady, so they say! Well, what could I be to her now? And Delli? I had but one friend—he, too, has forgotten.”

The girl’s tears fell fast as she listened to the unconscious words.

“Of me he never thinks,” she said, “yet I alone remember when all have forsaken him.”

“The world is not God’s world,” he went on—a strange firmness in his voice—a fever hush burning in his sallow sunken cheeks. “Not God’s—no! it is the devil’s! And they who will not serve him, he kills; not in bodily torture, but in that living death of soul and spirit which makes life hateful to bear, and yet a sin to destroy. Had I been wise I would have served him—is it too late still?”

Nita’s face grew ghastly. She trembled like a leaf in her dread. The voice beside her continued its ravings.

“Dark, all dark; it must be hell! See the ribald crowd—hear the ghastly mirth. There is the false red on the harlot’s cheek—the curse of the drunkard reeling by—the moan of little children starving, naked, homeless—the bleeding wounds of bruised and pale-faced wives—the dreary mirth of painted girls—the stealthy clutch of the thief—the dreary whine of the beggar. And on all this is stamped woe, universal woe! There is no hope here now! And the devil, how he laughs at it all, sitting aloft on his golden throne, and seeing all men crawl to his feet and court his smile, and account themselves blessed for ever! ‘Give us gold!’ they cry, ‘and be our God. None shall serve so faithfully as we.’”

“Holy Jesus, he is mad!” sobbed Nita, hiding her terrified face in her hands.

“See! he comes to me—even to me”—so the wild voice went on. “And he has a face like my lost love—did he not steal her from me? did he not put a gate of gold between us? ‘Serve me, and you shall win her’—so he says. ‘Give the world what it asks—what is sensual—light—evil. Your aims are too high—your ideals too cold. Serve me, and art shall be success, and success is my

golden key. What use to dream of immortality here? who cares—who hears—who listens? If you be wise, serve me as others do, and enjoy life while you may; for indeed of the future who knows—or cares; but in the present all may have pleasure, if they will!”

“Dear Christ, he does not mean it—he does not know!” prayed the weeping girl. “Indeed he loves God and not the evil one; and he has been so good—so good. All he could do he has done, and to be unfortunate and fail always—oh, it must be terrible. And he dreamt of a greatness that should outlive his years—a fame that should never die—and now—to end thus.”

The words ceased abruptly. Tista had sat up, and once more seized me with his frail weak hands.

Nita drew back, and looked at him in terror, and bewilderment.

“What does he play?” she cried, as the wild weird notes came tumbling fast and furious off the strings.

It did indeed sound unearthly.

He had taken Tartini’s subject in his “Trillo del Diavolo,” and intermingled its weird harmonies with some of his own fanciful embellishments. The result was like no earthly sounds, certainly like no music that Tista had ever given utterance to. Tones scarcely human in their writhing agony—their fitful despair—their alternations of pathos suffering and anguish, were forced from me. Nita trembled like a leaf as she listened, uttering ejaculations to all the saints under her breath. Then, quite as suddenly as he had begun, he ceased. His eyes turned to her, then in bewilderment roamed round the room, and finally rested on me.

“Nita, how came you here?” he asked faintly. But ere she could reply he fell suddenly back on the pillow, white and senseless as death.

CHAPTER II.

"LOVE IS NOT GLAD."

"Love is not glad,
Nor sorry as I deem,
Labouring he dreams, and labours in his dream;
Till when the sport is finished, lo, I see
His web reeled off,
Curls and goes out like steam."

Laus Veneris.

NITA summoned the woman who shared the next room to Tista's garret.

"See," she said, "he is a friend of mine, and ill and in want. I must leave him now, for I go to the theatre at nights, and I dare not disappoint the people. I will give you a gold piece if you will stay here and watch him till I return, and if he wakes give him the soup I shall send. He is dying of hunger; you must be careful and not give him too much at one time—just a little to keep the life in him. Will you do this? We are strangers, but trouble should make us friends, and I will pay you well."

The woman looked pityingly at the unconscious figure, and clasped the white-faced babe she held in her arms still closer to her breast.

"It is nothing dangerous—no fever?" she asked, placing her child's safety even before the tempting of gold that was offered.

"No, no," said Nita impatiently; "only hunger, I tell you."

"Then I will do all you ask," said the woman readily. "But how cold it is here;" and she shivered.

"Is there any one who could come with me and bring back wood and charcoal, so that you could make a fire?" asked Nita eagerly. "My time is so short, I cannot return till the theatre is over."

"I will send P'tit Bottes with you! He does all the errands for us here," was the answer. And the woman left, and presently returned with a little elfish misshapen boy beside her, whose cunning face and eyes did not impress Nita very favourably. However, she was too much pressed for time to make objections as to her messenger's appearance.

"Can he be trusted?" she asked.

"He?—*mais oui, certainement!* Madame may assure herself of his doing that which she desires," was the eager assent given to her doubtful look and question.

"Come, then," said Nita, in her pretty imperfect French. "I depend on you," she added, turning back as she reached the doorway and glancing at the woman, who had seated herself by the bed, having placed me rather roughly on the floor.

Nita's sharp eyes noticed this. She hesitated, then came forward and took me up and placed me under her shawl.

"It is not safe here," she said, in explanation of her action. "If he recovers, and anything has happened to the violin, it will break his heart. I will take care of it for him."

Then she hurried away, followed by the boy.

When they reached the street she stopped at the first shop where she could obtain fuel; and purchasing as much as the boy could carry, bade him to take it once to the sick youth's room.

"And listen," she said, laying her hand on his ragged blouse sleeve. "In an hour's time my servant will be here with soup and meat and other things. Watch for her, and see that all she brings is taken to *him* at once. Do this, and I will reward you when I come; you shall have a franc piece for yourself."

The boy's eyes glistened.

"Madame shall be obeyed," he said, with a gleam of delight at the prospect of such unheard of riches for his own exclusive possession. "P'tit Bottes will do all that

Madame desires; Madame need have no fear that her orders shall not be performed."

* * * * *

Nita hurried straight to the theatre and sought her dressing-room. There she hurriedly scrawled a few lines in pencil, and despatched it by her own maid. Placing me carefully on the little couch, she threw a shawl over me, and then left—as I supposed—for the stage.

From time to time she returned, and would throw herself down and sigh heavily. Perhaps to-night her triumphs lacked something. The applause of the public gave her little pleasure.

At the end of the evening I heard many voices, those of men and women, chattering around. Nita was laughing gaily, but the laughter sounded forced and unnatural. From what they said it appeared her success had been unusual and very great.

"Who was that beautiful woman in the outer box of the first tier?" she asked. "Monsieur de l'Orme, you know every one in Paris—can't you tell?"

"She has only just arrived. She comes from Italy. That was her husband with her. Yes, she is very beautiful. I heard her name, but I have forgotten. Why do you ask, Mademoiselle Nita?"

"She seemed interested in me or in the piece, I don't know which," said the little singer.

"Not to be wondered at; mademoiselle has surpassed herself to-night," was the answer.

"What a lovely face she had!" continued Nita musingly.

"Ah, bah! mademoiselle," returned the man's voice a little impatiently; "why waste your thoughts on your own sex. It is sacrilege, and that too when so many of *ours* are dying for a thought or a word."

"I am afraid they will have to die, then," retorted Nita contemptuously. "I have other things to do, and more important, than to waste my thoughts on men."

"What heresy; and from one so courted, so worshipped, so admired!"

"A truce to such nonsense, monsieur. You know how I detest it. Besides, to-night I am in no humour for compliments, and I am in a hurry too. Will you be good enough to move away, so that I may enter my dressing-room?"

"Mademoiselle is cruel; it is a crime for beauty to be so cold and so exclusive," came in a sulky murmur from the entrance, which I supposed Nita's admirer still barred.

"Monsieur, I am in no mood for trifling," said Nita brusquely. "Will you be good enough to let me pass?"

"Oh, if mademoiselle is in earnest——" was the apologetic rejoinder.

"I am in earnest, and I hate such fooling as this," Nita retorted angrily, and swept in and closed the door without further parley.

"Those brutes! how I detest them all!" she muttered angrily as she washed the rouge from her cheeks and changed her stage finery for the plain black dress and shawl she had worn before. Then she stooped and took me up.

"How glad I am to have found him again," she murmured. "But, oh, my dear, my dear, if only I could help you!"

Her breath caught in a quick sob. She clasped me closer to her breast and hurried swiftly away to the stage-door, speaking to no one as she went. Then she called a cab and got in, and was soon driven swiftly away through the gas-lit streets to the garret where Tista lay dying.

CHAPTER III.

"AND THEN——"

PAIN, weariness, hunger, and suffering, had made sad havoc in Tista's constitution. He was utterly helpless now, when Nita had discovered him—too helpless to oppose her will in any way; too indifferent even to heed the care, and watchfulness, and tenderness which he owed to her.

It was nothing to the girl to deny herself for him, and she did it most unselfishly. Food, warmth, medicine—all these she procured for him; and gradually beneath their influence his senses came back; his weakness was replaced by some slight return of strength.

It seemed to him as if he had been dead, and had risen from the grave; but a strange sense of weariness, disappointment, and regret was all he felt.

"You have no right to serve me thus. I cannot permit it," he said to Nita one day, as she came to him and proceeded to warm some soup she had brought, at his replenished stove.

"You talk foolishly," she answered him, with quiet scorn. "Do you wish to die, really?"

"I do not care."

"It is as wrong to say that as to destroy your life. You tried your best to do it, but Fate was against you, you see. I found you, despite your endeavours to conceal yourself. Besides, I have good news for you. I have found some employment which will suit you at last, and as soon as you are stronger and can leave this wretched den, you will be able to commence work."

"Nita, you are an angel of consolation."

She blushed all over her pretty brown gipsy-like face.

"Nothing of the sort," she said pettishly. "I am your

friend, if you will let me be so. But indeed you angered me greatly when you went away, and told me nothing, and left me searching in vain for you."

"I did not think you would trouble yourself about one so worthless."

"Che—e, Tista; you are talking nonsense, and you know it!"

"I am worthless, Nita. No one wants me. Why did you not let me be?"

If he could have seen her face, he might have read its unspoken appeal, its mute longing that was sealed in irrevocable silence. "Do not I want you?" it seemed to say. But he could not read it or hear it, for his heart was closed to mortal love again.

"You will be happier soon," she said presently, as she came to his side with the cup of steaming soup, and offered it to him, while he lay stretched so helplessly on that miserable bed.

"Why?"

"I shall not tell you till you have finished this," she said, in that pretty peremptory way to which he had grown accustomed.

He took the cup from her hand, and speedily finished its contents.

"Now tell me," he said, giving it back to her.

"It is not a very long story," the girl answered, as she took a seat on the rickety bench beside him. "About a month ago I was acting in the 'Variétés.' One night the principal singer was seized with sudden illness. The manager was in despair. He knew not whom to get to take her part. It was a holiday, too, and the theatre would be well filled; he did not care to close it. In the dilemma I came forward. I knew the part. I said, 'Would he trust me with it?' He seemed surprised. 'Let me hear you,' he said. Before the first act was over he expressed himself satisfied. Well, the evening came; I appeared. I was nervous at first, but the audience were good-humoured, and encouraged me. I gained confidence

—went on gaily; the result was I gained a complete success. It happened that during the performance I frequently observed a lady in one of the boxes. She was very beautiful, and richly dressed. I took her to some great personage. She seemed to notice me very particularly. The next day I received a letter from her, saying how delighted and astonished she had been at my performances, and asking me if I would sing at one of her receptions. Of course I agreed gladly enough. ‘You have the voice of Italy,’ she said to me. ‘It is so welcome, you cannot imagine *how* welcome, to ears that have not heard it for long.’ She is so lovely, this lady, but not happy; so it seems to me; always very grave and tender, but with something of melancholy still in her face, some shadow on its brightness. Her husband is a great man; he is rich and titled, and he adores her. No one can help seeing how he loves her. But there, I am running on; I shall weary you. The end of my story is that I spoke of you to this lady. I did not give her your name—only said you were a friend of mine, and so gifted, and yet—. Well, you know the rest, Tista. She seemed very sorry. She is tender of heart and good—that I know, though people do say she is proud and cold. ‘Bring him here,’ she said; ‘I will do everything I can for him. Would he care to play at my receptions?’ That is my news, Tista. Only think! to play there, where all the great people of Paris come, where you will have an audience who can appreciate you! Now, will you not try to get well, for your own sake, at last?”

He looked gratefully up at her eager face. A faint light, as of some crushed but still lingering hope irradiated his own.

“Yes, I will try,” he said simply. “I suppose there is something in me harder to kill even than life itself. I can hardly thank you, Nita, words seem so weak. But how good and true a heart is yours!”

She flushed hotly, as if his praise shamed her.

“Nonsense,” she said; “I have done nothing.”

"Nothing!" he echoed, in faint wonder. "If all 'nothings' were like yours, Nita, there would be fewer broken hearts and miserable lives in this wretched world."

"You will do your best to get well, then?" she said, as she rose to take her leave.

"Yes."

"That is right. I hope to find you better to-morrow when I come." She gave him her hand, then turned away. As she reached the door an involuntary impulse seemed to sway her. She came back timidly to his side.

"Tista," she said, "who is Daphne?"

He turned so white it frightened her for a moment. Then he said coldly—

"Why do you ask?"

"You spoke her name so often in your fever, and it seemed to trouble you."

"It does trouble me," he answered hurriedly. "Do not speak of it, Nita. Some day I may have courage to tell you; but not now, not now!"

"You are not vexed that I asked?" she said timidly.

"No; only vexed that I am still weak enough to treasure the remembrance of one who was as false to the instincts of womanhood as you, Nita, are true."

She went away then, glad, though disturbed.

"Who knows if he may not forget in time?" she murmured softly, as she reached the door; "and then——"

The blush on her cheek, the smile on her lips, finished that thought more eloquently than any words.

CHAPTER IV.

UNSELFISH LOVE.

"Oh love, love, love! Oh withering might,
Oh sun that from thy noonday bright
Shudderest where I strain my sight,
Throbbing thro' all thy heat and light."

TENNYSON

"You will be able to come to-morrow?" said Nita, some weeks after her discovery of Tista. "The signora has a grand reception. She would be glad to hear you play, if you can do so. She knows you have been ill, and is so sorry for you."

"But I cannot go to a great lady's house in such rags as these," said Tista, looking down at his shabby thread-bare garments.

"Oh, that is soon remedied," said Nita, lightly.

"No, Nita, I understand what you mean; but I am already heavily in your debt. I cannot——"

"Hush! do not be foolish," she interrupted hastily; "you shall pay it all back, I promise you; only say you will come to-morrow."

"Very well," he said wearily; "I will do my best; but I fear I shall play but badly. I am still so weak, and my fingers seem to have lost all power."

"They can never do that, I am sure. Do you know even in your unconsciousness you played, and so beautifully, too; the violin seems to know you, Tista; the moment you take it in your hand, it appears to speak. I never heard an instrument with such tones; it is divine."

"Yes; it is very beautiful," said Tista, laying his hand caressingly on me; "I think the spell of that dead woman's presence is always with it. At times there is something

unearthly in its wild, sad wailing tones. Then I think she——”

“No, please, do not say that,” pleaded Nita in alarm; “I hate to hear you! It seems so terrible to think of her haunting you. How can you encourage such an idea, Tista?”

“For me it has no terrors. You are strangely timid about some things, Nita, and yet in others you are so brave. It needs no small amount of courage to traverse these dismal thoroughfares; to brave the wretchedness and ruffianism on all sides of us, and yet you never seem to fear anything.”

“What should I fear?” she asked; “the poor are always good to the poor. I have nothing to fear from class antagonism. I am accosted often, but never insulted. They look upon me as one of themselves.”

But she did not tell him of the good she had done; of the thousand kindly womanly acts that had won for her gratitude and love for many a wretched forlorn heart. Her own life was often beset by temptation, but she never heeded it. To a woman’s heart there is no safeguard like the purity of a great love; and all the soft sins and gilded infamy, and rich profits, which might have been hers to take had she so willed, were utterly vile in her sight, and utterly powerless in their allurements.

She had no interest in, and sympathy for, human suffering than for human pleasures; hence, perhaps, the attraction which Tista had for her. He was so helpless, so dependent, and her whole heart went out to him in the fulness of pity, and the tenderness of a love whose strength she scarcely knew.

It love were not always at cross purposes, if it were not a thing seemingly beyond all direction or control, Nita might have made him so happy; but apparently he thought no more of her in that way than if she had indeed been a sister. All her goodness and unselfishness touched him deeply, but of the passion and devotion that filled her heart

he guessed nothing; and if he had so guessed, it would only have pained him—now.

But Nita suffered.

In all her toilful, laborious life he had been as a poem that gave it grace—a strain that gave it music and beauty. He had raised her thoughts and fancies to the higher level of his own genius. He was so utterly and entirely different in the unworldliness and purity of his nature to any one whom she met, or with whom she associated, that she had set him apart from them and placed him in the shrine of her own loyal, loving heart.

She loved him with a tender, simple, but most utter affection; an affection whose depths she herself had not quite known until his life had for a time been parted from her own, and in the desolation and misery of absence she had at last learned the truth.

Every murmur of his unconscious lips that spoke ever that one name, had been torture to her. She knew then that he, too, had loved in some other past of which she had no knowledge, and into whose sacred chambers she dared not intrude.

Daphne! Daphne! it was always Daphne! Had she loved him? Had Fate parted them? Was it for this he had seemed to grow so changed and despairing; heeding little, caring little, for anything that life held; letting the misery of a hopeless passion paralyze even the force and fervour of his genius?"

She thought it must be so, and that thought gave her the courage to seek its confirmation from his own lips, even though she knew such confirmation would be a death-blow to her own happiness for ever.

The troubled, despairing look on his white face as he heard her question, "Who is Daphne?" answered her before his words. Yes, he had loved, and that love had been falsified—betrayed. If ever he found the strength to tell her of that story she knew it would be terrible for her to hear, but to know that she had had a rival who had been false and unworthy left still a spark of hope

within her own breast. Men were not always constant to the memory of one love, even if that love were true and noble and worthy, and this had not been the case with Tista's.

It seemed to her that if she could but rouse him to renewed interest in life, could wake him to fresh exertions and so feed the fire of his genius afresh, that in the triumphs he might win he would find consolation at last. True, love might be slow to come, or might come never, but she would have done something for him, and he would be grateful, and at least she was his only friend now in the loneliness and misery of his life.

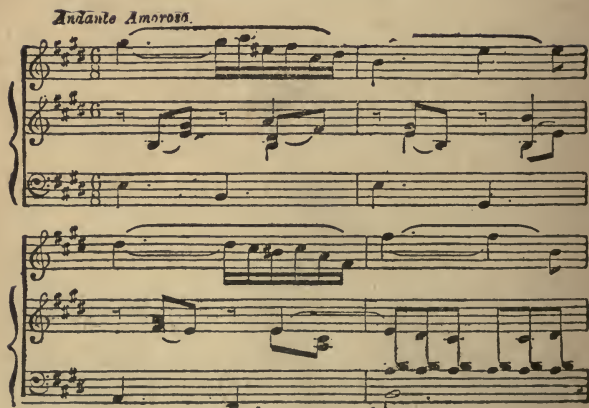
Nita's was an unselfish love that sought always and above all for his happiness. If she had known Daphne and could have brought her to his side and seen the errors and mistakes of the past explained, she would have done it, so that he might be glad once more. But she was powerless to help him in this. His own words had proclaimed the woman he had once loved to be false to all instincts of womanhood, and a strange thrill of pleasure, that seemed almost base, ran through Nita's heart when she remembered this. The burden of her life now was ever those words that had escaped her once: "Who knows if in time he may not forget? and then——"

BOOK IX.

THE STRAD'S STORY.

CHAPTER I.

THE IRONY OF FATE.



THEY were in Paris.

Daphne had wished to see her father, who was wintering there in the gay bright city he loved so well, and so her husband brought her thither as soon as that wish was expressed.

The great world was ready to court and receive them. Rank and wealth and beauty throned Daphne as queen of

society, ere yet she was fully aware of her success. Her husband was very proud of her, and that great love he held in his heart's depths was more passionate and absorbing than ever. It was still fevered by unrest, for never could he be quite sure that Daphne loved him as he longed and craved to be loved; but at least he knew that no man of the many who crowded around her and paid her the homage her beauty and her gifts deserved was likely to rival him in her estimation, or win a softer glance, a tenderer smile, than those she gave to him.

One evening she came into her reception-room dressed for the *conversazione* that was to take place. Delli was there alone. At the first rustle of her trailing robes he turned eagerly towards her. She swept slowly along the length of her splendid chambers till she reached him. Then she paused. He held out his hands as if to draw her to himself while the passionate admiration in his eyes kindled to deeper warmth as she let his arm embrace her and felt the touch of his lips on her sweet crimson mouth, her soft white throat, her bare snowy shoulders.

"How lovely you are," he murmured, as blushing and laughing she drew herself away from those passionate caresses.

"And how foolish—you," she said rebukingly; "why, you have crushed my flowers already."

"Have I not excuse enough?" he asked tenderly, as he drew her arm to his own, and led her to where the costly mirrors reflected the vision of her fair imperial loveliness.

"Daphne, you grow more beautiful every day."

"You should not flatter me so much, Francesco," she said, drooping her eyes beneath his ardent gaze, and turning away from the image of her own exquisite face and form.

"You will make me vain."

"You could not be that, Daphne; you have too much sense!"

"A truce to compliments," she said lightly. "I am glad I look well, because it pleases you. I suppose our

guests will be arriving directly. I asked my little favourite, Nita Castrani, to come early, and introduce her friend before my time is taken up by strangers. She ought to be here now."

"Daphne," said her husband, a little hesitatingly, "are you not rather too lavish of your generous interest in welcoming such people to your house. Remember, dearest, your position is a lofty one, and the world will resent any forgetfulness of dignity on your part accordingly."

"The world shall never make me forget what is due to genius and merit," she said haughtily. "It may preach its maxims to those more prudent and wise than myself. I have not yet learnt to be utterly heartless!"

"You are all that is noble and good," murmured her husband tenderly. "It was but a word of caution on my part. You must not think I cavil at your generous actions, dearest. No one admires them more than myself. But still, to take up a stranger, of whom you know nothing——"

"Except that he is poor and lonely, and beset by difficulties; and that I, who once knew the meaning of such things in their full bitterness, can help him," she cried. "Ah, Francesco, no worldly wisdom can ever make me forget *that*; and all the more in that I remember what I was, do I feel I should aid those to whom fortune has been less kind!"

"Do you not know the name of this youth?" asked Delli, after a moment's pause.

— "I never asked," said Daphne, in some surprise at the troubled tone and glance of her husband. "Nita says he has great genius. If she is right, it will be pleasant to me to help him; if not—well, it can do no harm."

"If he cannot play, and breaks down before your guests?" suggested Delli.

She smiled brightly, even then unconscious of the irony with which Fate was playing with her words.

"I have no fear," she said. "I believe in him; he has won my interest already."

Then she left the anteroom where they had been standing, and passed into the *suite* of reception-chambers, to greet her first guests.

* * * * *

It was later in the evening, and I lay in my case on one of the marble consoles. The lid was open, as Delli had left it; he had been playing on me a short time before.

Presently came the sound of steps, the rustle of feminine skirts. Then a voice said—

“You had better rest here till I seek the signora. There is such a great crowd in the outer rooms, I will bring her to you, and introduce you.”

“Very well,” said a languid voice; a voice that would have made me start as I recognised it, had I been capable of such a manifestation of surprise; and straightway the speaker came to my side, and laid down my old friend, the Amati, close to me.

“Have we really met again?” I said, in our own inaudible and incomprehensible language.

“You don’t mean to say that’s you, Strad?” was the answer.

“It is indeed,” I replied, and the familiar salutation was very pleasant; for had I not often longed for news of my former friend, and its adventures since we parted, and wondered whether it was still in Delli’s possession, and what had chanced to Daphne?”

“I see you are still with Tista,” I said. “How changed he looks, and how ill!”

“He has suffered greatly, and has been at death’s door,” answered the Amati. “But you, how came you here? Are you with Delli?”

“This is Delli’s house; did you not know?”

“No; and where is—she—Daphne?”

“She is his wife.”

“Delli’s wife?”

“Yes; they have been some nine months married.

They have come to Paris for the winter. He is very rich now. And she—did you know she turned out to be the daughter of a Florentine noble, a very great personage indeed; but thoughtless and improvident, as indeed most of them are, and with many titles and little money to keep up their state; and Delli and he were friends. Delli always loved Daphne, only it was Tista for whom she cared; but Tista deemed her——”

“What are you saying?” my friend cried. “It was she who was false to Tista; she has broken his heart, spoilt his whole life. Surely it is not to her that he has come to-night? To play here?—a hired performer in her house! And he not even knowing she is married! It will kill him.”

“It is very strange,” I said. “How oddly affairs have shaped themselves! She is just beginning to care for Delli. For long they were very unhappy. She almost hated him——”

“Then, why did she wed him?” asked the Amati.

“Do you not see? They deceived her about Tista. She could not help doubting at last. Why did he never write?”

He did write; it was she who never answered.”

“Then they have been betrayed—both; but, oh, if they should meet—now?”

At the same moment there came a rustle of silks over the carpeted floor; a lovely vision stood smiling graceful welcome in the doorway.

“Your pardon, signor,” said a woman’s voice in Italian. “Your friend told me I should find you here——”

A moment. Then a hoarse cry cut short her words—a cry scarce human in its agony.

“Daphne—you!”

Breathless she gazed; breathless she stood in the blaze of the glittering lights. Her eyes swept over him as he rose, while he looked on and on at her, as only eyes look at some loved and cherished thing that they have never thought to rest upon in life again.

“My God!” she gasped. “It is Tista!”

The name, the sound of her voice, the conflict of feeling:

pictured in her changing face—all unmanned him. Forgetful of wrong, of shame, of betrayal, suffering, despair, he crossed the space that divided them, and threw himself at her feet.

She drew herself away. She shivered back from his touch, and a vague awakening fear was in her eyes.

“Do you hate me so? Have you quite forgotten?” he said, and rose and looked at her with an agony of reproach that might have touched any heart that had loved him once.

What she said I scarcely know. All madness of reproach that tongue could frame; all expression of bitterness, suffering, anger, that ever left a woman’s lips, left hers then.

They were quite alone in that pretty, dainty boudoir; but I think, had there been a crowd beside them, they would still have forgotten all else, have still stood there, with their life’s history and their life’s sufferings speaking out the truth at last, taking revenge upon long silence and long pain.

He listened in amazement to that hot upbraiding, that bitter scorn.

“Daphne,” he said. “Are you mad, or am I? Did you not bid me cease to write? Did not your father himself, at your request, send me money to buy off my pretensions? Did not he forbid my love, at any cost to myself, saying that you deemed it undesirable? And when I prayed for one word from you, for one softer remembrance of days that had been so blessed, your only answer was—silence.”

It was her turn now to look incredulous.

“I cannot understand it,” she said, putting her hand to her head, as if to sweep the heavy tresses from her brow. “Have we then both been deceived? Alas! who has dealt this fearful wrong? Oh, Tista, are you sure—are you sure? There have been days in my life when I longed to know you true, when I prayed for death sooner than your falsity; and now——”

"Now surely you believe it—know it," he said beseechingly. "Although your rank separates us, although I should not have dared to hold you to any promise given in other days, yet still, Daphne, if I could but have believed your heart regretted as mine did, suffered as mine did, it would have been some consolation."

"It is not my rank that separates us," she cried hopelessly. "Did I not write and tell you it made no difference in my feelings? I was yours to claim when you would."

"I never had such a letter!"

She grew deadly pale. Her eyes rested on his changed face, with its history of suffering, endurance, despair. The tears swam slowly in her own, and dropped unheeded on the diamonds at her breast.

"You have suffered, too," she said in slow, painful accents; "and you did not love *her*?"

"Love whom?" he asked amazed.

"The girl with whom you left Bologna."

"My traducers have had an easy task, if they have so readily persuaded you to believe *that*, Daphne!" he said with proud coldness.

All her self-command gave way then. She sank down on the seat beside him and buried her face in her hands, while a passion of weeping shook her from head to foot. He could not look at her distress unmoved. Besides, he did not know yet how utterly she was lost to him.

"Oh, hush! do not weep!" he implored. "I have suffered even as you; but to see you again, to know that you are still the Daphne of old—true, loving, faithful—that of itself is worth any suffering to hear! Even if you be great, I know your nature is unchanged. It was *that* which grieved me. It seemed a wrong to love you, and yet—to know that you could so easily forget. You shudder! Well, we will speak of it no more. Only how could you believe I ever loved another woman? Did you know so little of me as that? or did you think so humbly of yourself as to believe that, having cared for you once, my

heart could ever again take to itself another ideal, or be content with a lower worship?"

"Oh, hush! your words kill me," she moaned. "Do you not know? have you not heard yet?"

"Know what?" he asked in wonder, as he raised his young, haggard, woeful face to hers.

"My God!" she sobbed in her agony. "How can I tell him?"

There came the sounds of gay voices, of happy laughter, of wild joyous music swelling in strains of triumph through the air. She shuddered as she heard; the world was already claiming her, forcing itself upon her notice. At any moment this solitude might be disturbed. She rose to her feet, her hands pressed against her heart, her face haggard, white, passion-marred as his own.

"Look at *that!*" she said, and held out her hand, and pointed to the finger on which rested the golden symbol of wifehood.

He looked at her, incredulous, amazed.

"You love me, and can show me—*that!*" he cried.

She bowed her head. Words would not come. Before them lay the wreck of youthful hopes, of all the joys they had once shared together. Their memories seemed to fly back to the old dead days, to the rapture of confessed love, to the sweetness of silent kisses, to the gladness of summer hours spent side by side in the ilex shadows, to the passion and purity and beauty of that mutual love which had had so sweet a dawn—so dark a night.

Their eyes met.

A moment, a word—it might be theirs again. So that look seemed to say. Then she turned aside, shutting her eyes and heart to the deep intense delight that stole trance-like upon her senses.

"You must hate me—now," she said. "I have been false, while you—you never forgot."

"No," he said dreamily, "I never forgot. But then—I am not a woman!"

"Is your love more faithful than my own?" she cried

sorrowfully. "Have I not betrayed myself—abased myself as I never thought it was in me to do? Do you think, though wedded, I have forgotten?"

"Whom have you wedded?" he asked, in a cold, sad voice, unlike his own.

For a moment she hesitated; a deep flush stole over her face; a troubled look came into her eyes.

"Francesco Delli," she faltered.

For one instant he seemed stunned, stupefied.

His face terrified her, so fearful was its agony, so death-like its pallor.

"My friend!" he said at last, and the words fell from his lips cold and hard as pellets of ice. "A fit person to betray me! My friend and—my love, and both knew how I loved and how I trusted!"

"But hear me," she pleaded, and laid her hand upon his arm.

He shook it off as though it stung him. A fierce light shone in his eyes, a strange feverish brightness coloured his deathlike cheeks.

"A great lady!" he said, "and I thought her my Daphne still!" And he laughed, as in mockery.

Ere she could answer, the door opened. On the threshold stood Delli.

"I have come for you, Daphne," he said in gay, cheerful accents. "Is your new acquaintance not ready yet? The people are waiting."

Daphne drew back. Tista advanced one step forward.

"I am at your service, signor," he said frigidly.

Delli reeled back as if a blow had struck him. There was a look in his face terrible to see—the look of a man who has received his death-wound.

"Tista!" he cried, and then was silent.

At sound of the familiar voice and greeting, Tista's calmness seemed for a moment to desert him. Then, with a supreme effort at self-command, he bowed low, and said coolly—

"'Tista' to friends only, Signor Delli. Baptista

Marcello is my name. Is it your wish I should play to your guests now?"

The mocking voice, the ironic words, roused Delli. He gave one swift glance at his wife. She was white and still as marble. Then he opened the door and led the way like a man in a dream.

Tista followed with me.

I saw a vista of lights and flowers, of lovely faces and gleaming jewels, of beauty that is fashion, and fashion that is beauty; for all the loveliest and wealthiest of Parisian society had flocked to the salons of the lovely and wealthy Contessa Delli. I saw Daphne float past and take her seat among the audience, white and calm as a statue.

Every eye was turned on Tista. What was there about him that enthralled their attention and chained their gaze to his?

He was only a slender, graceful, fragile youth, with a white, sad face, and eyes full of passionate dreams and dying hopes. But it was a face that made men's hearts throb with pity, and women's eyes grow dim with tears, as it met their gaze.

A faint applause—a faint welcome of the stranger—ran through the crowd. He never seemed to hear it.

Some one placed his music before the accompanist, and he gave out the opening bars.

Then he began to play. I don't know what spell was at work within him. I don't know how the dear familiar touch of the slender boyish fingers woke such passionate pleadings, such exquisite melody. Certainly it seemed like no instrumental sound, but rather like some lovely, sorrowful, wailing voice that thrilled through those vast and crowded rooms, while a silence, hushed and awe-struck, fell upon them all.

To one alone among those splendid jewelled women was that music known. To one only did it come with the sweetness of joy long fled, with the sharpness of remorse still present! He played on and on, and a strange fear

fell on those who heard. But I alone could see the deathly whiteness of his face, and hear the laboured beating of his heart. All listened in a wonder that was breathless—in a trance that was unbreakable. From women's eyes I saw the tear-drops rain; but from *one* woman came a sob whose anguish reached the player's ear, and made his fingers tremble on the strings.

Slower, sweeter, softer, the sad notes fell; the end drew near, the strain was well-nigh over.

Suddenly, quite suddenly, he staggered, trembled, then fell face downwards upon the flower-strewn platform, while through the horror-struck crowd ran a low, faint murmur of fear!

In one moment Delli was beside him. He raised him in his arms as though he had been but a feather's weight, and bore him to the room he had just left.

As he laid him down the door was thrown open, and, white as the silent figure before her, Daphne entered. Her husband moved aside without a word.

She never spoke. She only tore the linen from his chest, and felt in vain for the beating of a heart that was for ever still.

No look, no sigh, no word answered her own. The eyes whose agony she had read, the hands whose clasp she had felt but a few brief moments before, were now beyond her gaze and touch for ever!

For a time she seemed like one mad with grief, calling upon his name, kissing the cold and pulseless hands; and Delli could but stand there and gaze upon it all, and know, in the full bitterness of truth, that his wife's heart had never been wholly his own; that his treachery had met with an avenger, even in the first sweet days of promised happiness; that the power of his tenderness and devotion were as yet nothing in comparison with the greatness of this dead, lost love, that now lay before her in mockery of all he had done to win her for himself.

Seeing her weep, hearing her words, knowing all the suffering he had dealt to them both, his strength gave way,

The horrors of remorse shook him. A dread of the woman for whom he had dared and done so much came over him at last. He had no strength to look on her face and read his condemnation in its anguish.

He turned silently away, and left her.

I lay among the flowers on the platform. A crowd had gathered round me, talking in low, terror-struck accents of the scene they had just witnessed.

"Is he better?" they asked, as Delli came among them once more.

He looked at them like a sleep-walker, with blank, unseeing eyes.

"Better? He is *dead!*"

A great silence fell upon them. Here and there a voice murmured—

"Dead! So young! And he would assuredly have been great. What wonderful music his was!"

And a woman's voice sobbed—

"Great! Yes; it is well to acknowledge it now, when his life has been wrecked and his heart broken, and all the world was deaf and blind to every effort! Great! Yes; when you might have gladdened him with the word, you would not speak it; and now he cannot hear it, be your tongues ever so loud in praise!"

And she turned away, weeping and sad at heart. It was Nita.

* * * * *

Delli took me up, and without even seeming to remember his guests, went away to a room where all was solitude.

"He has gained his wish," he said. "How well I remember his words! 'Only once to stir men's thoughts to a rapture like my own! only once to move them as one man, to make them forgetful of all save what they heard; to see criticism, coldness, contempt, give way before me, fused into one glowing flame of burning feeling; only once to see and feel this, and I should be content to die!'"

Do I not remember, too, my own words: 'What a price you will have to pay for such a conquest!' But I did not dream the price would be his own life! And she — so nearly won; she whose heart was just unclosing, whose love was faintly answering my own, she at last knows all, and knowing it, must despise, even if she does not hate me! Dear Heaven! how can I bear my life now?"

The fruits of his wrong-doing had indeed borne a bitter harvest, and his own actions were also his own avengers.

CHAPTER II.

"TO HAVE KNOWN LOVE."

- "Ah love, there is no better life than this,
 To have known love, how bitter a thing it is.
 Yea, them that know not
 Shall they have such bliss?"

Laus Veneris.

THEY had been as nearly happy as two people can be in a marriage where one has all to give, and the other all to forget.

Slowly Daphne's heart had been wakened from its lethargy of misery; its intensity of bestowed love; its alternations of fierce woe and dead despair. In many respects, so it seemed to me, Delli was better suited to her than Tista, for Tista had been so dreamy and gentle, and was half a poet and full of fancies that were beautiful, certainly, but unpractical in their beauty, and holding creeds too high and pure and exalted for men to follow, or do aught but laugh at. Now Delli, on the other hand, was a man of sound intellect, though of headstrong passions. He had set his mind upon winning Daphne, and he had won her, but it had given him no content.

There was ever present in his thoughts the one dread, that his treachery might be discovered, and he had led a wandering, restless life ever since their marriage.

Now the sword had at last fallen. They had met, and he could not doubt, after one look at his wife's face, but that she had discovered all. The shock of Tista's death fell so sharply upon this knowledge that it almost stunned him. He dared not speak to her or console her. He knew that at last she had discovered his perfidy, and that knowledge crushed him to the dust.

As he left her kneeling there beside her dead lover, his face was terrible in its anguish; but she never seemed to think of, or give heed to him in that first hour of her grief. She seemed as one beside herself with the sharpness of remorse, or the guilt of some heavy sin.

"Dead! and I have killed him! Dead! and I have killed him!" That was all she said, over and over again.

"What was he to you that you grieve thus?" a voice beside her asked, in sudden sharp fear, that seemed indignant at this display of grief.

She looked up, with strange, dazed eyes, at the face of Nita, the singer.

"What was he to you?" the girl asked again, the fierceness of jealousy in her voice, and breaking down the barriers of respect she owed to rank or wealth.

Daphne rose to her feet.

"By what right are *you* here?" she asked.

"By the best right of all. I am the only friend he has had in this cruel, heartless city. I have stood between him and death more than once."

"And yet you brought him *here*?"

"I did not know; how could I? Your name was never mentioned between us. Was he your lover—once?"

The beautiful marble face flushed.

"We were lovers, yes," she said, dreamily; "from childhood to youth. We were lovers till treachery came between us; we only found it out—too late."

"And were you not faithful enough to keep yourself

unwedded? Having loved him and holding *his* love for all time, could you disbelieve so easily? Had you so little faith?"

"You do not know," said Daphne, shivering restlessly beneath the scorn of the girl's bitter words.

Nita laughed.

"No; I do not know; I could not understand, even if I did. To me there is but one sort of love, and *that* is unchangeable through any storm of trouble, doubt, jealousy, sin. It seems madness to many; doubtless it is; but to me it seems the sublimest element that ever raised human nature above the lower instincts of the mortal. He loved you thus—if indeed you be that Daphne of whom he spoke. In the ravings of delirium, in the wretchedness of suffering, in the trials, anguish, sorrows of his life, still your name was ever on his lips and in his heart. And his reward——" Her voice broke into a sob.

Involuntarily their eyes turned to the calm face of the dead youth; its serenity and peace seemed to rebuke the angry passions of the one, the feverish remorse of the other.

Weeping, they fell in each other's arms, thinking for once not of themselves, but of—him.

The soft gloom deepened and the night passed on; but, utterly heedless of all that others might think or say, they kept their terrible vigil beside the dead, whom both had loved, and who had loved but—*one!*

* * * * *

"Do not leave me," Daphne had prayed, and Nita stayed on till they left that dreary room at last, and gave up the lifeless thing before them to the last sad offices of other hands.

And so the long weary day passed, and I was shut up there alone. None disturbed the darkness of the solitude.

With the fall of night a familiar footfall broke the stillness; a shadow came between me and the white still form

on which the dim light of a swinging lamp cast its faint rays.

It was Delli.

The misery on his face, in his eyes, spoke out their own tale of penance. He came and gazed down at the dead boy until at last strength forsook him; and kneeling there beside him, in the solitude and darkness of the night, he clasped his hands before his face and the large tears fell through his fingers one by one.

"If I had only known," he cried, in vain and heart-broken reiteration. "He is happier even now than I. He has her heart, her memory, even in death. I—I alone, must live and bear and suffer!"

And he moaned aloud, like one in strong torture.

He did not hear the soft noise of the opening door; he did not hear the sweep of velvet folds across the floor; but suddenly a cold hard voice broke the silence, and cried—

"Have you come to look at your victim?"

He rose to his feet; his great dark eyes flamed like a lion's by night, as they rested on the black-robed figure of the woman before him.

The light of the lamp showed the ghastly pallor of her face, the gleaming coils of loose, falling hair, the anguish of the lovely tearless eyes.

"You do well to reproach me," he said, humbly. "I have deceived you both."

"Does it seem any merit to confess it now?" she asked coldly; "now, when I know the truth! now, when I know how basely I was betrayed! now, when—oh, God, can I say it?—I thought you noble enough to love—at last?"

Her words thrilled him to the heart.

"Do not make my punishment *quite* unbearable," he prayed, and his voice shook like a woman's. "No torture is so great as to know how nearly I had won all that I suffered and sinned for so long."

She looked at him, and all her self-command gave way. She burst into bitter weeping.

"Oh, why did you do this?—why?" she cried between

her sobs. "Do you not know that henceforth we must seem ever as his murderers?"

"*You* at least are stainless," he answered bitterly; "on me lies all the guilt as well as all the punishment. I did but come to bid him a last farewell, Daphne, and then for ever I will rid you of my presence. Every look, every word of yours now is but added torture — a torture I cannot endure! Daphne, I have loved you as few women are loved. Say you forgive me; let us part in kindness; for indeed when we part now, only death can ever unite us again."

She drew her hands from her eyes and looked at him as a wounded deer might gaze at the hunter who has dealt its death-shot.

"Forgive you?" she said; "who am I that I can afford to judge? Have I not sinned too? To have loved as he loved I should have preserved like faith, like constancy, and I did not."

He trembled like a leaf where he stood facing her in the lamplight, while between them lay the white dead form of the friend he had betrayed—of the lover she had mistrusted.

"You have given me the deepest bliss and the deepest suffering my life has ever known," said Delli at last, in faltering tones. "In leaving you, I leave all that makes life endurable; but it is my punishment, and it is just."

"Yes," she said, and slowly raised her eyes to his.

That look had all the sadness, the weariness, the despair of a hopeless heart, but it had also something of yearning and something of regret. It seemed to wrench asunder all the bonds of his self-control, all the manhood in him melted into passionate beseechment which for the moment drowned even his remorse, and broke his resolves like river reeds, and cast them at her feet. He crossed the floor of the chamber and threw himself before her.

"My wife! my love!" he cried; "can you not pity me? can no memory of the past few months plead with me for

forgiveness? You are a woman and born of woman, and for a love that has sinned and endured so much for *your* sake only, you surely have some pity. Even *he* might plead for me did he know all; even he——”

“Might deem a treacherous friend, and a false lover, deserved a wife’s trust?” she interrupted.

He rose to his feet. Her words stung him to composure and self-respect even now.

“No; not that; even he could not think dishonour ever merited—forgiveness.”

He moved away, his head bent, his step slow and unsteady.

She looked after him regretfully, sorrowfully.

“Will you not say farewell?” she said. “After all, you are my husband, and——”

She paused. Her eyes rested on the marble brow of the lover who had gone to death for her, and then on the anguished face of the man whose sins condemned him to a life beside which that death looked almost happiness.

He stood wavering and hesitating at the door.

“Your husband,” he said; “no, never again—never again. You never loved me, Daphne, even when you knew me at my best. You can never love me *now*. Farewell; but if, in any time to come, you can forgive——”

The words seemed to choke him. He was not hero enough to bear such a scene unmoved.

“Forgive?” she cried, and tears fell like rain upon her clasped hands. “Oh, what am I—weak, vile, fickle? Dear Heaven, pardon me—even now, even now, I cannot bid you go! I *have*—forgiven!”

With one stride he was at her side, but in his face was none of the fire of passion now; only the glory and gratitude and bewilderment of a great and scarce credible joy. He bowed his head on her tear-wet hands—his breath came short and swift.

“Are you an angel,” he said, “to forgive thus?”

“No,” she murmured, amidst her passionate weeping;

"only a woman—and a woman weak enough to pardon all for—love!"

And side by side they fell on their knees, and prayed, in the presence of him they had both wronged, for pardon and pity and peace.

CHAPTER III.

FINALE.

Allegretto.

VIOLINO 1mo.

VIOLINO 2do.

cres.

SPOHR.

Duetto { THE STRAD'S STORY.
THE AMATI'S OPINIONS.

Does Daphne seem a feeble heroine after all? I can but paint her as she was—a woman who had struggled, suffered, and finally been conquered by the very love she had most violently opposed.

After the first revulsion of feeling, produced by the shock of Tista's death, and the discovery of Delli's treachery, she had yielded to the love which, despite herself, had begun to spring up in her heart for her husband. She saw his

errors, she felt his wrong-doing most keenly; but, all the same, she could not condemn him again.

Reading the misery of his heart, knowing the martyrdom to which he was about to condemn himself, she was not strong enough to bid him go.

Had it happened before the scene in Venice, her resolution might have been different. I cannot say. I know that, whether she loved him or not, he had become too much a part of her life for her to look forward to his absence with any sort of relief.

Tista was dead; their love was a thing utterly of the past. No amount of suffering or martyrdom on the part of either could bring him back, or give the old joys, and youth, and gladness to either of them again. And so—well, was it wisest to spend the remainder of life in vain regrets, or to make the best of the future that Fate had shaped out for them so oddly?

I leave that question to my readers to decide.

Nature is full of change, of destruction; but yet the flowering seasons return, the ground closes over the yawning void the earthquake has made, the wild storm-wave rolls back, and the sea smiles in bright and tranquil beauty once more when the hour of turmoil and destruction is past.

Are human lives different? Nay, it seems to me they do but follow the universal law, when they strive to resume duties that sorrow has disturbed; to go back to the distasteful routine of life; to smile as though tears were forgotten, as if the dead child, or the lost love, or the ruined fortune, were things out of mind, even as the world says they are. Grief does not kill—often. It is sharp, keen, terrible; but all things pass, and it passes too. Men cannot make public altars for every sacrifice performed, nor isolate themselves from the world at large because in their hearts is some sad memory, some abiding grief that haunts them phantom-like in their hours of solitude, and that only death can exorcise.

Daphne was never quite happy again—not happy with

the happiness of youth and carelessness, when sorrow is a thing unknown; but she lived on and filled her station in life, and did her duty to the utmost; and none, seeing her fair face, her brilliant household, her calm, proud acceptance of the world's homage, would ever have imagined she too had a skeleton locked in the recesses of memory, which even her husband's untiring adoration and lavish love could never quite banish.

There was one thing strange about her. From the hour of Tista's death she never again could endure the sound of music, nor did she ever attempt to exercise her own beautiful voice even for her own pleasure.

Delli never played before her, or even when she was within hearing. He, too, seemed to have lost what fondness he once had for the art that was thenceforth sacred to the memory of the dead boy he had befriended and betrayed.

"Music has no beauty for you now," he had said once to Daphne, and she had shuddered and answered, "None!"

For, oh, mortals! do you not know that the music your ears hear with gladness, is only the echo of what lives in your own hearts?

And her heart had lost the key-note of joy for ever.

* * * * *

I have little more to chronicle now.

When Tista was dead, there were many to discern what genius lay in the mildewed scores he left in his garret—in the hundred snatches of melody and fancy he had transcribed. The fame he had craved came—as most things come to those who crave for them—too late for the joy they might once have brought, the life they might once have saved! Not the mingled praises of the whole world could open that closed grave, could light again the divine fires of genius, once quenched in neglect, and misery, and despair!

There is little justice on earth; least of all is there any

for a life spent in the service of others, a life whose fairest and noblest gifts are bestowed only to be trampled under foot, and then atoned for by after regrets or after honours.

But the world knows this so well—so well; why should I repeat it? So it has been; so it will be, till time shall cease and eternity begin.

* * * * *

The Amati and I were once more together in uninterrupted companionship.

One day I heard the story of the woman in Bologna; the story confided to Nita, but which she could never associate in her mind with Delli, seeing that the woman he had betrayed had preserved her secret too faithfully for any other living creature to speak his condemnation.

"He was not a good man, and yet he has gained all on which his heart was set," I said to the Amati regretfully one day.

"My dear Strad," it answered, with that superior wisdom of which it had just reason to be proud," he would not have gained anything had he been a *good* man. I lived once with a bishop, and he used to say, 'The wicked flourish like the green bay-tree.' It struck me as singular that he should make that remark so often, for he was an apt illustration of prosperity himself!—but then the clergy are given to self-blindness. The loftier the standards they raise, the less inclined I have observed are they to follow them. In fact, as I said before, the world is chiefly composed of fools and hypocrites. There are a few good people; but they have all the sufferings of the thousand and one *bad*, thrust on her own poor shoulders, and not unusually break their hearts over the evils they are powerless to remedy."

"You do not suppose Daphne will ever know of—that other?" I asked my friend.

"Not at all probable. Whatever his faults have been,

he certainly has loved her as few women are loved. She has begun to feel that at last, and seems content."

"After all, it is given to few, very few, to win those they love. On one side the balance is sure to be wanting!"

"Was there ever a perfect marriage yet, do you suppose?" asks the Amati.

"History chronicles perfect *loves*; it leaves marriages alone!" I say sententiously.

There is but one thing more to state, and my story is ended.

One warm summer night, in Florence, Delli had invited some friends to pass the evening with them. The conversation turned upon a young singer, whose fame was wide-spread and universal.

"But she is cold as the veriest statue," complained a young Florentine, with a bright face and winning speech; "and every one says she has declared she will never marry; and she means it."

"Has she a lover?" asked Delli.

"No; she favours none."

"A strange freak, truly; and is she beautiful?"

"Very; but surely you have heard her; every one raves of Nita Castrani."

Daphne, who was present, turned her grave eyes upon the speaker.

"I know her," she said; "and I can believe it is quite true what you relate of her."

"Do you know the secret of her coldness, madame?" asked another guest.

"Yes," answered Daphne quietly. "It is the only secret that keeps a woman's heart inviolate—*fidelity*!"

"She *has* loved, then?"

"Yes."

"Bah! She will love again. Who ever heard of such constancy as that?"

Daphne's face paled. Her eyes sank. She knew her

husband's gaze was upon her; she knew, too, the thoughts that were in his heart.

"It is not usual," she said at last; "but in this instance I know it to be *true*."

And something in her face and voice forbade all questioning, and the subject was not pursued.

"Nita has not forgotten, you see?" the Amati said.

"No; she is too true a woman to forget; but her constancy is a ceaseless reproach to Daphne. You observe Nita never comes here now."

"What a strange thing this human life is—nothing but a series of cross purposes!"

"Yes," I said. "Now, if Tista had but loved Nita, and Daphne had but loved Delli, there would have been four happy people in the world. As it is——"

Or, as it *was*, my story tells for itself.

ONLY AN ACTRESS

CHAPTER I.

IN THE "ROW."

"ONLY an actress!"

The cool, cutting contempt of the voice uttering these words made me look round in curiosity. The "Row" was thronged with the daughters of fashion, an assemblage at once numerous and aristocratic, and scores of equipages stood along the rails, waiting till it was their owners' pleasure to re-enter them.

A girl was passing slowly through the throng, while many eyes followed her with that compound of curiosity, speculation, and admiration in their gaze that ever waits upon the presence of beauty, or—notoriety.

The girl's face was singularly delicate and beautiful; the cool, sweet wind had lent it a transient flush, and ruffled the cloud of golden hair above the smooth young brow, beneath which her soft, dark, serious eyes looked somewhat wistfully at the cold insolent faces around her.

The season was just commencing. The fresh tender green, that is never so green or so fresh as in the first mild days of April, was the sole covering of the great gaunt trees. The buds of the chestnuts were still in embryo, but the sunshine was warm and brilliant, and the wind soft and wooing as the breath of spring could make it.

Fashion was filling the park, and something besides fashion too; pain and pleasure, sights and laughter, want

and woe, all the peripatetic mixture that makes up society, all the "classes" who had leisure or inclination to waste on that idle morning saunter, which is the prescribed amusement in the season. And it was there I saw her first.

She had alighted from her neat one-horse brougham, and was walking with an old, white-haired man—her father, as I afterwards learnt—and as she walked, all eyes turned to look at her; but for one and all that serene childlike gravity never changed; and the face, with its dainty bloom and wavering colour, looked to me the fairest and most exquisite there, set as it was, in the dark richness of sables and velvet, like a picture in an ebony frame.

"Who is she?" some asked, for such beauty and such grace could not pass unnoticed; and then it was I heard the answer I have quoted as the heading of my story, "*Oh! only an actress!*"

Ah, how many years have passed since that spring morning! How strangely have her fate and mine been twined together! What floods of sorrow have descended on that fair girlish head, and shadowed the beauty that was then so exquisite and peerless a thing!

But I see her now as I saw her then, with the innocent face, and soft guileless eyes—I see her passing slowly along under the budding boughs, with the spring sunshine gleaming on her hair, and warming the peach-like bloom of her cheek. I see once more the calm gravity of look which rests on the curious, or impertinent faces around, unmoved, unruffled, by either the curiosity or the impertinence. I see and hear the petty slights and scorn of dainty dames, whose own characters are vile in comparison with the purity and simplicity of the girl they stigmatize as "no better than the rest of her class." I hear the sweeping denunciations and whispered scandals, which to her are unknown, as indeed they are unfitted; and with a spasm of fierce indignation I turn away, sick at heart for the injustice so lavishly dealt, wildly longing to blazon out the truth of these shams and follies around

me; to tell these daughters of society that it would be well for them were their hearts as pure and their lives so blameless as that of many a girl who is to them "Only an Actress."

I was on the stage myself in those days of which I write. I had no particular talent for it, but my father and mother had both adopted that line of life; and from the age of five, when I took part in my first pantomime I fell naturally into the same groove.

I was acting in burlesque at the pretty little Crown Theatre—one of those travesties where bad puns, and breakdowns, and comic songs are set off by the meretricious charms of satin tights and spangled doublets and marvellous scenery—and it was after a morning rehearsal there that I first heard a new actress was to make her *début* on the boards, and had chosen the *role* of Pauline in "The Lady of Lyons," for her first appearance.

There was much speculation and discussion among the "company" respecting her merits and talents, and a feeling of curiosity had prompted me to go to the Park that morning to see her.

I could have done so at the theatre if I had chosen to wait for the time of her attendance at rehearsals, but I had a fancy to look at her in her own character first. I loitered along in the great thoroughfare with one of the *corps de ballet*, a pretty madcap girl, who was posted up with the latest news and naughtiest scandals, and who had seen Irene Vernon, and was waiting to point her out to me.

"*That girl!*" I exclaimed, as she came in sight. "Why, how young she looks—a mere child!"

"My dear," said pert little Mag D'Arcy (her *nom d'esprit*), "of course an actress never lets herself look *old!* I have known one at sixty passing very creditably for thirty-three."

"But you can't say *she's* 'made up,'" I retorted indignantly. "Any one with eyes in their head could see her complexion is natural—and how beautiful!"

But little Mag (short for Magdalen, I must tell you) shrugged her shoulders, and said *her* days of belief in

natural charms were over. She had seen too much of the arts and tricks which women adopt to put her faith in any of them again. And then, as she suddenly spied out some acquaintance of the male sex, she left me abruptly, and went off with a more attractive companion.

So it happened that I, impelled by some irresistible fascination, followed Irene Vernon in her promenade through the circle of fashion, feasting my eyes on her grace and beauty, keenly observant of the sensation she created, and hearing with no small amount of scorn the sneers and malicious remarks (of her *own* sex only) which proclaimed her to the *beau monde* as "Only an Actress!"

The words came home to me with a bitterness, a pang that I involuntarily prayed they might never bear to *her*; for, oh, men and women who laugh to scorn the friendship of one girl for another, who say that our much maligned sex are incapable of genuine and disinterested love for each other, believe me, you wrong us sorely! I know that I loved Irene Vernon from the first moment I saw her. I love her still with the purest, deepest love my heart has ever known, and God alone knows how my love has been tried, and what it has endured!

But now for my story.

After that morning in the "Row" I did not see her again till the night she was to appear at our theatre.

Overpowered with curiosity, I managed to get to the wings, and stationed myself where I could get a glimpse of her. As the curtain drew up, and the great sea of faces spread tier upon tier, row upon row, before and above her, I saw her flush and pale, and tremble pitifully.

"Stage-fright," I murmured to myself. "Poor thing. How will she get on?"

As the scene proceeded, her nervousness increased; her voice was almost inaudible; yet she looked so young and childlike, that many in the audience seemed to pity and compassionate her. Only a few women in the boxes laughed behind their fans with the cruel, contemptuous

laughter that is so truly feminine, and a few roughs in the gallery shouted to her to "Speak up!"

Fortunately she had but little to say, in the first act, but all the *esprit* and audacity necessary for the part were wanting; and as the curtain fell, and she rushed off the stage, I saw her eyes were full of tears, her whole frame quivering with emotion.

Some irresistible impulse prompted me to speak to her. I advanced, and laid my hand on her arm.

"Don't be so nervous," I said gently. "You must try and forget any one is listening. Think only of your own part."

"Oh, I have acted horribly!" she almost sobbed. "What will he say?"

"Who? The manager? Oh, he is very kind. He won't scold you," I said consolingly. "Take courage, and *determine* to succeed in the next act. You're sure to do it then."

She looked at me half bewildered, then smiled such a beautiful, tearful smile, that I gazed at her in wonder. It seemed so strange to see such radiant, unearthly beauty on any human face.

"Will you come with me to my room?" she said eagerly. "You are so kind, and—and I was so afraid every one would laugh at me."

I answered her with cheerful, hopeful words, and together we hurried through the dark and mazy windings of that "behind the scenes" which is such a region of enchantment to every one, except those—who know it.

On our way we passed the manager and another gentleman—a grave, dark, handsome man, who was often at the theatre, and who (so rumour whispered) was more nearly connected with it than the outer world was aware of. As my companion rushed hurriedly by, he stepped forward and whispered a word in her ear. I do not know what it was, but the result was magical. Her face broke into the loveliest flush of colour, her red, sweet lips parted with

smiles. She gave him one look from her glorious eyes—a look that might have repaid any deed of service ever rendered, a look that made me tremble with some prophetic foreboding as I read the passionate thankfulness and intense feeling it revealed. She did not attempt to speak, but when we were in her dressing-room, she suddenly threw herself down in a chair, and buried her face in her hands, while quick convulsive sobs shook her from head to foot. I was fairly frightened for her next call. I poured out *eau de Cologne*, and dashed it over her face and hands. I brought a glass of wine from a small stand near by, and forced it through her white trembling lips. Then suddenly the fit passed. She rose from her seat, and drew one long, deep breath, as of relief.

“For *his* sake,” I heard her say, as if unconscious of my presence; “for his sake I will conquer.”

Then her eyes fell on me.

“You have been very kind,” she said, gently. “Tell me your name.”

“Dolly Clarke,” I said simply, not taking the white, outstretched hand she held to me, for somehow she seemed so far removed from my sphere. I felt she was so thoroughly a “lady,” and I knew I was nothing but a little ignorant burlesque-dancer, earning my ten shillings a night gladly and gratefully, and keeping my life honest from some instinctive feeling of self-respect and duty to the memory of my dead parents.

Whether she noticed my avoidance or not, I do not know. She turned to her glass, and looked at herself till a sudden inspiration seemed to seize her. I watched her move to and fro, her lips breaking into smiles, her lovely eyes glowing with new radiance, the rich, soft colour flushing her cheeks, the power of her wonderful gifts asserting itself at last, and for the time transforming her into a new creature.

When she was called on again, the whole house seemed electrified at the change in her. Before them now moved no terrified, incompetent girl, but the living, breathing :

personation of the poet's thought. The pretty audacity and insolence, the pride, sorrow, and love of the wilful, bewitching Pauline were all portrayed with the utmost vividness and perfection.

I watched her with breathless wonder from first to last. I did not go near her or speak to her again, for fear of discomposing or offending her. But as I saw the vast audience laugh and weep, and follow her moods, and hang on her words, as she rang the changes on the various phases of woman's character, I, for once in my life, understood the dominance of genius over every grade and class of human life, and wondered not at the frenzy and excitement that reigned in the house as the piece drew to a close.

She seemed perfectly unconscious now of criticism or approbation. She played as simply and naturally as if she were rehearsing in her own private room at home.

The manager and the stranger were close to me once, and I heard the latter say—

"Was I not right? Did I not advise you to wait ere judging?"

"You were quite right, Lord Montdesne," was the reply. "I am enchanted with her."

"Claude, my boy," said another voice (that of a great dramatic critic on one of the leading papers), "you have got the genuine article at last. The girl is a born actress, and as gifted as she is beautiful. Few are capable of compelling such an audience as this to change their opinion so rapidly."

Her success was indeed marvellous. The public and the critics were unanimous in *that* verdict, and when she came off the stage for the last time the manager welcomed her with an enthusiasm which spoke of an assured future and princely terms.

She did not speak to him, but I saw her eyes turn to the face of Lord Montdesne as he leaned beside one of the wings. In a moment he was at her side.

"You have fulfilled my phrophecy," he said; and I wondered why his voice trembled so as he spoke. "You

have won a splendid triumph. All London will be at your feet."

"And you? what do you think?" she whispered eagerly.

Very low and soft the answer came, as he bent his handsome head, and looked into her eyes. "You were perfect. And—I cannot thank you enough for what you have done for me."

His words puzzled me then. I knew their meaning later, knew that her success that night had saved him from beggary and ruin.

CHAPTER II.

FAME AND FRIENDSHIP.

THE fame of Irene Vernon was soon wide-spread and universal.

After that night I saw her constantly at the theatre, and she never forgot to speak to me, and would take me to her dressing-room (that privileged sanctum to which all were refused admittance) every evening between the acts.

Gradually I learnt her story from her own lips. The story of her father's descent from riches to poverty, of his rescue by the generosity and kindness of Lord Montdesne, then only plain Claude Effingham, for he had but recently inherited the impoverished estates and the title of his uncle, the Earl of Montdesne.

"He has known me since I was a child," she said simply; "and his kindness to us I can never repay. You know," she added, with a faint flush, "that he is said to be extravagant and reckless, but few indeed are aware of his goodness of heart. And I—how much I owe him!"

I was silent. I had heard much lately of this reckless young lord's history. He was very handsome, with a pale,

dark face, and grey eyes, and straight, level brows, and a certain expression of langour and contempt that is so often seen on the face of the aristocrat in this nineteenth century—the expression that seems to say the very exertion of living is a bore, and the mere fact of being roused or interested in any given thing, a weakness to be studiously avoided.

He had all the fashionable vices of the day, had kept race-horses, and fêted actresses, and betted and gambled for the mere intoxication of hazard. He had done all these things, and worse, and was a little wearied and a little contemptuous of them all now. His last and most ruinous folly had been the taking of this theatre, and decorating and embellishing it with the most perfect taste and disregard of expense. His first season had been an utter failure; but with a certain dogged obstinacy and determination that was a part of his nature, he had again opened it, and this time with the attractions of one of the loveliest and most gifted actresses the stage had ever seen.

I knew now why his thanks had been so grateful that night of Irene's first appearance. I knew now that her gifts would ensure success for this season, and bring back the lost thousands to his coffers again.

I wondered much, when I saw these two together, what she was to him. Her secret I had long guessed, and that he admired her was only too evident; but of anything deeper than admiration I saw no trace. One thing was, however, evident; his perfect respect and openly displayed courtesy for the beautiful girl, influenced the demeanour and conduct of others, and from the highest to the lowest connected with the management or performances at the "Crown," not one would have breathed a disrespectful word of Irene Vernon.

Once I went to her home at her express invitation. It was on Sunday, and the only day she was ever free then. Her house was small and unpretentious, but marked with the evidence of refinement and good taste throughout. Her own room, where she told me she studied and spent

her spare moments, was a perfect gem in its way, such simple elegance and exquisite harmony were evident in even the minutest details.

It was here that, sitting side by side in the dim twilight, she told me the few particulars of her life I have mentioned. It was here that, led on to confidence by her ready sympathy and sweet interest, I told her my own simple history too.

I knew I was not her equal in any way; she was so essentially a lady; I, as I said before, had no recommendation of birth or standing or refinement to commend me to her notice; and yet, for the humble, worshipping adoration I gave her from the first she rewarded me by that priceless gift of her friendship—the friendship that has been so precious and so sweet a thing to me through all my lonely life—the friendship, that I thank God to this day I never forfeited or falsified.

Her father was old and feeble; she was his only child, and her devotion and care of him were beautiful to see. They seemed to live very quietly, and had no friends save Lord Montdesne, and a few literary acquaintances and art critics brought by him occasionally. She studied hard, and no amount of success seemed to alter her gentle humility, or make her more self-conscious and arrogant of her wonderful gifts. The life of the great actress, of whom the world raved now, was simple and innocent as that of a child; and I, knowing her better day by day, and loving her with a deeper love the more I knew her, felt such reverence for her purity, such wonder at her genius, as never have I felt before or since for any living being. Again and again on those quiet Sundays would she beg me to come to her pretty *maisonnette*, and after a time I ceased to make excuses to avoid her, and accepted them with a gladness she little guessed. She never let me feel the difference between us; she never by word or look betrayed that she considered there was any, and I think her companionship and advice and example did more for me than any other teaching I could have had.

She seemed very happy in those days, happy with the untroubled, slumberous gladness of a dreamer; reading, studying, singing (she had an exquisite voice), attending to her father, and accompanying him on his daily walks or drives; then turning from this quietude and simplicity to the triumphs of the stage, with its brilliant victories and nightly homage.

And yet, for all that I knew of her life, in its purity and integrity, I heard scandals whispered of it, and stories told, that fired my whole soul with indignation and horror.

The town knew all about her—oh, of course, the town always *does* know everything about a man or woman who is in any way celebrated, or what it does not know it invents, which answers the same purpose.

She was Lord Montdesne's mistress; and the natural daughter of the Prince of X——; she had been picked up in a casino by an enterprising manager, who had discovered her talent for the stage, and educated her at his own expense, on condition of her signing an agreement to act for him only for the first three years, and so on; and yet, if I had told these scandal-mongers that her life was as blameless as a child's, that the society she received was far less harmful, and perhaps infinitely more respectable than that of many a fashionable leader of the *beau monde* whose select receptions had been the talk of the season, who would have believed it? I might have said all this, but of what use? People will believe in the immorality of the stage as long as the stage lasts; and if they ever allow that there are exceptions, they seem as sceptical of the exceptions as they are convinced of the rule.

So the season passed. Irene Vernon had made her mark, and was celebrated henceforward; and it was at the close of a long series of brilliant triumphs that she left town to spend two months at a quiet little seaside nook in Wales, and insisted on my accompanying her and her father thither.

CHAPTER III.

“BY THE SAD SALT WAVES.”

WHAT a change from the heat and dust of crowded thoroughfares, the din and turmoil of work and want, as exemplified by the Great City, was the life I led now!

A little cottage, with the sea just visible through the great flowering hedges, a garden blushing from end to end with roses and myrtles, and great glowing fuchsias, and the scarlet blossoms of geraniums—such was our home.

Irene loved the sea. She was always beside it when her father could spare her, sometimes dreaming her sweet idle day-dreams as I had seen her do in the pretty London home—sometimes floating over the quiet waters in one of the fisher-boats—sometimes strolling along in search of shells and sea-weeds and anemones, returning laden with these spoils, and pleased as a child to have them; and day by day she grew fairer, or so it seemed to my adoring eyes, with a loveliness that ripened her pale, delicate bloom into a glow and richness of colour, and gave depth to the soft serious eyes and wealth of golden hair, and made her something to wonder at in her youth, and beauty, and innocent dreams.

One summer forenoon she and I were out on the shore.

The wind was very fresh, and the blue sea sparkled and glittered in the sunlight; little foamy waves crested all its shining surface, and broke in mimic warfare over the wet sloping beach.

“Let us have a boat,” said Irene, suddenly; and I, to whom her will was sweetest law, readily assented.

She chose a small boat, and laughingly declared she would have no fishermen to row it for her to-day, though two or three made eager offers of their services.

“She would row, and I could steer,” she said; and in a

few moments we were off, the tiny skiff dancing over the waves as if it too were gay and joyous as its occupants.

She was in one of her happiest moods this day. We laughed, and jested, and talked as if no shadow of care or trouble had ever touched us; and yet God knows we had had enough of both—ay, and the time was at hand when we were to have more and heavier sorrows still.

An hour or two had drifted by. She had grown somewhat weary of rowing, and was leaning back on her seat, with her oars at rest, while the full, flowing tide carried us further and further out to sea. The wind grew fresher and the waves rose higher; suddenly I drew her attention to these facts.

She startled and gazed round, and for the first time a look of anxiety shadowed her face, and startled me.

"I had no idea we had gone so far," she said; "and the tide is dead against us now, Dolly."

Following her glance, I saw the distant coast, the little jetty that looked like a mere speck, and the waving signals of a group of fishermen who were beckoning us to return.

I was not by nature cowardly, but I confess a feeling of fear swept over me as my eyes rapidly took in the scene. The sky was darkening with clouds, every moment the wind seemed rising, and the waves that had been so bright and pretty in their mimic play now looked fierce and formidable as they gathered strength and volume every moment, and broke in angry foam against the side of the tiny boat.

I saw her turn deadly pale, and the sight gave me courage.

"Let me have the oars," I said. "You are tired."

"No, no; I row better than you; sit still, Dolly; we shall get to shore safely yet."

I prayed it, ah, how earnestly! But as I saw the vast distance we had to traverse, and watched with anxious eyes the darkening sky and rolling waves, I trembled for our safety.

Urgently and skillfully the brave girl toiled on. I saw great beads dew her brow, and the veins in her delicate

wrists swell like cords. At last I insisted on taking an oar too, and though a less skilful rower than herself, yet my superior strength and freshness gave me vigour for the task. Every nerve was strained, every exertion used and yet how little way we seemed to make! How laborious the toil! how slow the progress!

"If they would only come out from shore!" I sighed, helplessly, as I looked at my darling's beautiful, flushed face, and tiny, swelling hands. "We can never reach it against such a tide as this."

"Courage, courage, dear!" she said, with one of her bright, beautiful smiles. "Don't despair yet."

Again we bent to our oars; again we put forth our feeble strength and energy. The shore looked nearer now—and what was that? Surely some one was there urging the fishermen to come to our aid. A tall figure, spy-glass in hand, was watching and directing, and assisting the hurried preparation of the men.

"We shall be saved," I gasped, turning to my companion; "they are putting out a boat for us."

She did not speak, for at the same moment a huge wave rolled over us, half filling the skiff with water, and drenching us both from head to foot.

I tore off my hat, and, handing her my oar, began to bail out the water as rapidly as possible.

"Another such monster will swamp us," I cried anxiously, as my eyes glanced at the heaving, tumultuous waters on every side. "O God, grant they may be in time!"

Still she never spoke; only her face turned white as death, and her lips closed firmly over her small, set teeth, as if she breathed some inward determination unknown to me.

On and on we sped, slowly but surely now, for despair lent strength to our feeble arms, and the hope of rescue grew each moment more certain.

Buffeted, fatigued, blinded with the salt spray, and drenched with the dash of the waters, still we struggled

on. I heard a shout from the shore, the shore to which our backs were turned, the shore at which I dreaded to glance, it seemed so far, so fearfully far away.

Against the force of the waves, and the passionate, opposing strength of the resisting tide, we still made way. One timid, backward glance over my shoulder showed me the breadth of sloping beach, which was covered with anxious figures watching us, and showed me too—oh, happy sight!—a large boat coming swift and sure towards us.

It seemed near, but yet not near enough, for the ruthless tide swept us back ever and anon, and our feeble strength was now exhausted. Even as I looked, even as the shout of our approaching rescuers rent the air, I heard a low stifled cry of agony and dread. I saw Irene fall forward, and the oar snap in her hands, like a feeble reed.

“God help us!” she wailed. “It is broken.”

Broken—and the small command we had over the boat seemed gone now, and a huge, foam-crested wave rose fiercely behind us, like some devouring monster seeking its prey. A rush of water covered us, the feeble boat made one brief effort to mount, then all was dark and dense; and the deafening roar of breakers, and the fearful force that dragged me down, down, I know not where, are the last things I remember.

CHAPTER IV.

HE LAST EVENING.

WHEN I came to my senses again, I was wrapped in blankets, and was conscious of an odd, stunned feeling and buzzing in my ears and head. For some moments I could recollect nothing clearly.

Then suddenly it all came back—the sight of the roaring

sea, the sound of the rushing waters, enveloping me in their awful embrace, and the horrible feeling of sinking down, down into that fearful trough whose unfathomable depths were open to receive me.

I tried to move, but I was so swathed in wraps and coverings that I was quite helpless. I spoke, and my voice sounded odd and faint even to my own ears; but a figure rose and came towards me, and a kind voice said cheerfully—

“Ah! this is an improvement. Come, miss, drink this, and go to sleep again. You will be all right to-morrow, I’m sure.”

“Where is Miss Vernon?” I asked feebly. “Is she safe?”

“Safe—yes, and well enough, bless your heart. She was not in the water so long as you were. Lord Montdesne had her up in no time. It were a mercy he was so nigh when the boat was knocked over—but there, the idea of you two young ladies going out over all that wild sea by your blessed selves! Lord! it’s a mercy you’re not both drowned fathoms deep, so I say.”

It was Irene’s old servant, a faithful, garrulous, pleasant old woman of some fifty years, who was beside me, and the cheery face and friendly voice were a welcome sight and sound to me after my recent alarm.

“How came Lord Montdesne there?” I asked, in bewilderment.

“Sure enough he came down from London this morning to see the master, and as he heard you and Miss Reeny” (she always called her young mistress thus), “were out on the beach, he went to meet you. There he heard how you’d both gone off together in a boat, and seeing how wild the sea was getting, he got the men to launch another, and set off—not a minute too soon, as things turned out. But there, I mustn’t talk more; you ought to be quiet. Now take your draught and go to sleep.”

All attempts to get her to talk any more were fruitless; and as I felt really weak and languid, I obeyed

her orders meekly enough, and drank the hot spiced stuff she gave me without any objection, the result being that I slept the whole evening and night without once awaking, and next morning, though feeling a little stiffer and shaken, was in no way the worse for my immersion.

As soon as I was dressed, I hastened to Irene's room, and knocked for admission. There was no answer, and on entering it I found it deserted. Wondering a little at her absence, I went downstairs, and into the pretty bow-windowed parlour where we breakfasted.

That also was tenantless, and no sign of breakfast was visible. I ran up again, and hearing voices in Mr. Vernon's bedroom, I lingered for a moment fancying Irene might be there.

Just then the door opened, and old Margaret—her eyes red with weeping, and her face bearing signs of great distress—came out.

"What is the matter?" I asked in alarm.

"Matter—matter eno'!" she sobbed, wringing her hands, and scarcely able to speak in her sore distress. "The dear old master's gone—died in the night, without a soul near him—died calm and painless, so they say. God rest him! But oh, my poor young lady, my dear, dear child, she's just fit to break her heart for him, and she so young and friendless too!"

I leaned against the doorway pale and faint in my great bewilderment and awe.

Mr. Vernon dead! Dead! and only yesterday morning he had smiled on us both as we parted from him in the cottage garden. Only yesterday, and he had stood hale and hearty as though the burden of his sixty years were still easy to bear, among the bowering roses, waving us farewell.

Only yesterday!

And now he would never smile or speak, or welcome his child again. He had gone his way to the silent land, never to return to us more.

"Will you go in?" asked Margaret presently. "Miss

Renny's there. Lord Montdesne fetched the doctor, but he's gone. I wish you'd persuade her to come out; there's—there's—things to be done." She hesitated, and broke out into fresh sobs. "Oh, what a day—my poor, dear master—a better gentleman never lived—and to think he's gone."

I turned silently away, and went into the room.

It was a pitiable sight that met my eyes. The bright August sunshine streamed through the curtained windows, and lit up with a strange, solemn glory the white head on the snowy pillows, the calm, placid face with no shadow of pain or suffering on its brow; nothing but the seal of a peace eternal as the laws of heaven.

Beside the bed knelt Irene. Her golden hair waved loose and unconfined around her slender figure; her white muslin dressing-robe had been flung hurriedly on, and was partly open, showing the beautiful neck and marble shoulders beneath. Her tiny, blue-veined feet were naked, and thrust into embroidered slippers. Her whole appearance bespoke the hurry and agitation with which she had obeyed that summons to the room of death.

At the window stood Lord Montdesne. His handsome face was pale and troubled, altered strangely from its usual calm and passionless repose.

As he saw me he came hurriedly forward.

"I am glad you are here, Dolly," he said; "try and get her away. Make her speak or move, or do anything. She has knelt there just like a statue ever since—ever since she came."

I went to my darling girl, and touched her shoulder.

She never moved or looked at me.

"Miss Vernon," I whispered beseechingly, "do come—do rouse yourself—try to think he is happier, better off."

Alas, the trite, cold words fell on unheeding ears! Her eyes gazed up at me in dumb reproach; her white, despairing face, that looked as if carved in marble, neither changed nor altered from its dead, set calm.

Again I spoke. Again I besought her, and passing my

arm round her slender waist, I tried to raise her from the floor. Then suddenly she started to her feet, and seized my hands wildly.

"It cannot be true! Oh, tell me, it cannot be true!" she said, her voice all harsh and strained, so different from its usual sweet gentleness that it startled me to hear it.

"My dear," I told her gently, "it is true; but it is God's will. Try to think that——"

She turned and gave one swift look at the snowy bed and its silent occupant.

"God's will!" she cried wildly. "And I am all alone. In all the wide world there is no one to love or care for me now!"

I looked sadly at her, and then at the quiet figure in the window. His face flushed; he made one quick step forward, as though to speak, and then, apparently, altering his purpose, turned to the window again.

All was still in the room now. Outside, the sunshine fell on the gleaming waters; the voices of the fishermen rang loud and clear through the morning air; the soft, cool wind stirred the muslin curtains, and brought on its wings the breath of roses from the garden below. But within, all was desolate and troubled, and the bright, living sunshine, and cheerful voices, and fragrant scents, seemed a mockery of the grief and woe that had fallen on us there.

It is ever so in grief. The sharpness of contrast with the outer world, which is so unmoved, by our heart's anguish is intensely painful to bear. It seems natural to fancy the dark pall of our woe will cast its shadow over nature too; but happily for us it seldom does, or the world would be too dreary for life!

I spoke to my darling again; I whispered all the soothing, tender things I could think of, and at last, suddenly, her strange impassive, calm forsook her. She turned away from the dead man's side, with a wild burst of sobs that shook her from head to foot, and threw herself in my arms. Gently I led her from the room, and took her

back to her own. She threw herself on the bed, crying as if her heart would break; and for an hour or more I lingered beside her, soothing and attending to her with tenderest zeal. At last she fell into a sort of apathetic doze, and carefully darkening the room, I left her, and went to seek Lord Montdesne.

I found him in the little breakfast-room. The table was laid now, but the meal was untasted. He was sitting in a chair with his head buried in his hands, but at my entrance he started hastily up.

"How is she now?" he asked eagerly.

I told him she had gone to sleep at last, and seemed calmer.

"I am glad you are here," he said gently. "You will take care of her, won't you? Poor child, she was half right when she said she had no friends. She forgot *us*, though, Dolly."

I coloured as I glanced up at his handsome face. That this haughty, impassive young aristocrat should class me with himself, even for a moment, was an honour far too great.

"You are right in trusting me, my lord," I said softly. "I would lay down my life for her. There is nothing in the world I would not do to serve her, I am sure."

He took my hand, and looked keenly into my face.

"I am glad to hear it," he answered simply. "Dolly, I may have to ask you to prove the truth of your words one day. I think I can depend on them. You have an honest face at all events."

"Indeed you can, my lord," I said humbly.

"Now come and have some breakfast; you look faint and pale," he said kindly. "You had a narrow escape yesterday. It was a mercy I was down at the jetty to hurry those stupid men. They seemed to have no idea of going to your assistance when I reached them. As it was we were not a minute too soon."

"You saved our lives, my lord. What a debt of gratitude we owe you!"

"Oh, nonsense! I only did what it was my duty to do," he said lightly. "What—have you finished already?"

"I am going to see if Miss Vernon is awake," I answered, as I rose from my seat after swallowing the cup of coffee he had poured out for me—poured out so naturally and gracefully that I could not think there was any condescension in the act.

"If she is, I hope you will persuade her to have something to eat or drink. She has not recovered from the shock of yesterday; and this terrible grief, coming so suddenly upon her, is enough to make her ill."

"I will do my best," was my reply as I left the room to seek my darling again.

As I opened her door, she started from the bed. Her eyes were wild and eager, her face flushed; her hands, as I touched them, burnt like fire. "Dolly, Dolly!" she shrieked wildly. "Hold me, save me, I am drowning!"

I laid her back on the pillows, and rang the bell for old Margaret, but I knew as I looked at her, and heard the laboured breathing, and saw the scarlet flush on her delicate cheeks, that she was very ill.

We sent for the doctor again, and all through that long, miserable summer's day Margaret and I watched alternately beside her. She grew worse and worse, passing from delirium to unconsciousness, sometimes quiet and sunk in apathy, at others tossing and moaning, and crying out pitifully for her father or for me. At others she lived over that terrible scene in the boat—the danger, the dread, the rescue. Now and then she spoke of Claude, betraying in those wistful, murmuring, shattered words, the secret I had long suspected.

So it went on, till days had lengthened into weeks. Mr. Vernon was buried in the pretty little churchyard among the hills. Lord Montdesne made all arrangements, and looked after business matters. He told me Mr. Vernon was quite penniless; all he had lived on was his daughter's salary, and he had nothing whatever to leave Irene.

"Of course there is money enough of her own to keep

her in comfort for the next year, if she likes to live quietly and inexpensively in the country," he said at last; "and I daresay she will do that, for I am sure she will hardly have the strength or inclination to fulfil her engagements for a long time to come."

"But the manager?" I questioned hesitatingly.

"Oh, I will make it all right with him," he said quietly; "*she* is the first consideration. On no account must she be troubled."

But I knew what loss and expense this meant to him, and how ill he could afford to be generous.

A new play had been in preparation for the winter season and the arrangements as to the scenery and dresses all made. If Irene could not undertake her part (it had been expressly written for her), and the piece was a failure, the result would be serious for the young lord. Of this, however, he never seemed to think; and I, listening to his generous words and unselfish thought for the beautiful young actress's welfare, marvelled more and more whether his admiration and interest would ever merge into something deeper.

He treated her with such perfect deference and gentle courtesy as he might have shown the noblest lady in the land, and yet there were times, especially in those days of her illness, when his voice shook and his face changed at the mention of her name, when his calmness seemed to forsake him, and I could have thought his feelings for her were altogether different to those he had entertained for any other woman.

She was so pure and gentle, so childlike, that even her beauty won fresh attractions from her nature and disposition. How could any man resist her, I often wondered? How could any heart not yield to the charm of that exquisite face, with its meditative eyes and its delicate hues, and eloquent lips that, even when set in silence, seemed to have all the loveliness of youth and genius?

Yet she called him only "a friend," and I am sure that then—at this time of which I write—he had used **no**

language of love, given no sign of passion ; that his reverence and esteem of her purity were the deepest, truest feelings of his nature—a nature her influence was gradually ennobling and raising to the higher level of her own.

CHAPTER V

LADY CISSITER.

THOSE slow weeks of sickness and anxiety dragged themselves along, and at last Irene was pronounced out of danger.

Lord Montdesne was backwards and forwards constantly (I often thought how wearied he must be of travelling); and fruits, flowers, game—every dainty that might tempt a capricious appetite—were sent in constantly to the little cottage.

Of course I knew from whom they came, but I supposed Irene knew too. Was he not her friend? Her earliest friend—so she had said to me once.

One evening, as she lay on the couch in the pretty bow-windowed parlour, he came, and for the first time since her illness she saw him. I think he was greatly touched by her changed appearance—she looked so frail and shadowy, and all her beauty was softened and subdued now by the langour of weakness and the exhaustion of grief.

His greeting was a glad one, though it was plain to see how anxious and troubled he felt. He lingered there with us till the sky was bright with stars, and the cool scented air almost too chilly for the delicate invalid's frame.

He did not allude to her past sorrow till she spoke of it herself—spoke of it bravely and sadly, with a pathos in her young, tender voice that brought the tears to my eyes as I listened. Then she went on to talk of the future—

the future that called for all her energies and exertions now, and would never again be cheered by the ready sympathy and tenderness of a father's love.

He besought her not to trouble about these matters, but she only smiled gently up at his anxious face.

"I must work doubly hard," she said, softly, with still that ring of pain in her sweet tones that was so new, and strange, and sad to hear. "It will keep me from thinking, and it has become a necessity now."

And listening to her words, and remembering those broken, shattered utterances when the spell of fever bound her unconscious brain, I thought there might be some stronger reason for her eagerness to resume her duties than even he imagined.

When he left us that night, she was very silent; and as I helped her undress, and hovered round to render all those little services her delicacy and my love made at once a duty and delight, I wondered why she so often sighed, and why her soft dark eyes had that hurt and sorrowful look.

But I never sought her confidence, knowing well that to a young and innocent heart the first touch of love brings often more of pain than pleasure, more of doubt than hope.

* * * * *

"There are new arrivals here, Miss Reeny," said old Margaret, next morning, as she brought her young lady's cup of milk to her room.

"Indeed?" was the languid response.

"And grand folk, too," pursued the old woman, with her usual loquacity. "A carriage of their own, and such fine servants, and liveries fit for a queen, and luggage enough for an army; and she so proud and grand, and looking as if the place couldn't hold her. I wonder what she's come for. Folks like that were only made for London parks and foreign watering-places, where there's nought but dressing and playing, and fussing and showing off, from morning till night!"

And here, having become pretty well breathless, she stopped at last.

"How did you learn all this?" I asked.

"Oh, the whole place is astir with their noise and their grandeur," she answered. "Sure everybody's talking of them since last night; 'twas then they came."

"Do you know their names?" I inquired carelessly, as I took the empty cup from Irene's hand, and brushed the loose masses of gleaming hair away from her beautiful face.

"It's a wonder if I don't," she said, laughing, "considering as how I've heard but little else from every one of the folk who come here. It's Lady Cissiter, and she's brought her family too, because the air here is said to be so fine, and the eldest little lord is delicate."

"Who?"

It was Irene's voice, but so changed and startled that I looked at her in amazement.

"The eldest son, young Lord——" began Margaret.

"No, no," she cried, interrupting her impatiently; "the lady's name."

"Oh, Lady Cissiter, or some such furrin-sounding title," announced the woman.

"*She* here!"

The words were spoken so low that I scarcely heard them; but as I looked at Irene's flushed face and startled eyes, I wondered who the new-comers were, and why their arrival should have discomposed her in such a manner.

After Margaret had left the room Irene turned quickly to me.

"It is odd that she should come *here*," she said, "here of all places in the world. You look surprised, Dolly. You don't know—how should you?—that Lady Cissiter is Claude's—I mean Lord Montdesne's—sister, and she hates me."

"Hates you?" I questioned, in wonder, the word seemed so utterly inapplicable to her.

"Yes," continued Irene calmly, though a bright spot burned on her cheeks, and the small white hands were

clasping and unclasping each other nervously; "she is a beautiful, proud woman, and moves in very high society. She married a very rich nobleman, her senior by thirty years, and they are wonderfully rich and perfectly—unhappy. But for all that Lady Cissiter moves in her own distinguished circle, unruffled and unmoved either by her husband's neglect or infidelity. Of *her*, scandal has never said a word. She is very cold, very haughty, and she did me the honour once of calling on me and—insulting me."

"Insulting you!" I exclaimed in amazement. "Is it possible?"

"Quite possible," she said calmly, "and quite true, Dolly. My dear, she is a great lady, and I am *only an actress!*"

I looked at her in surprise. Her tone was so scornful, her face so proud, her whole manner so changed.

"You would like to know why she insulted me, perhaps," continued Irene presently. "Well, she was good enough to tell me that her brother's interest in me was becoming talked about, and that the family had other views for him, and she thought it only right to warn me, because young and innocent as I was—she said *innocent*, Dolly—I might insensibly be drawn into much harm, and—well, the world, in short, would talk, and circumstances that *might* be harmless enough looked strange and equivocal. It was very kind of her to take the trouble to tell me all this, was it not?—and she seasoned her kindness with plenty of worldly wisdom, and said a great deal more that I cannot remember; but it was equally wise and—insolent!"

"She must be very different to her brother," I said indignantly; for I had never seen my darling so moved or heard her speak so bitterly.

"She is," was the quiet response. "There are women and—women—in the world of fashion, Dolly. I suppose it contents her to be an empress amongst her own set; to have big diamonds, and the best *chef*, and the greatest political leaders at her dinners. Accomplished ambition

is, doubtless, a thing to envy, and—to content. If her life is loveless and cold, at least it shows no surface for blame or pity.”

“You have not known her as you know him?” I asked hesitatingly.

The warm, bright colour flushed her face.

“Oh, no,” she said hurriedly; “and I do not wish to. In her eyes I am a very inferior person indeed. What is unsullied fame, or notoriety such as mine, in the sight of a great lady, or in the sight of the world either? We, who pay so costly a price for it, know how dearly it is bought. We sacrifice serenity, peace, privacy, and we gain—what? A fame poisoned by the slanders of envy, the whispers of suspicion. We are so much the sport and plaything of the public, that it catches at every incident of our life; every action, thought, word, gesture it can chronicle or misconstrue. Oh, Dolly, there are times when I envy the humble cottagers, with their little children at their knees. Their life is dull and simple, but at least it has love and safety!”

I was silent.

It was so new and strange to hear her talk like this. She who was ordinarily calm and unruffled as a pictured saint. She, whom I had imagined given over to dreams and fancies unhurt by the world’s scorn—unwitting of the world’s whispers. But I thought fiercely, and resentfully, of the woman who had disturbed her peace, and disbelieved in her innocence.

I little thought *then* what a bitter enemy she was to prove!

Presently we went downstairs again, and Irene busied herself in opening and reading her letters, a large pile of which had accumulated since her illness. The languor and fatigue seemed to have forsaken her to-day. She moved and spoke with a feverish restlessness that was new and strange to her, and I, watching her anxiously, felt as if some hidden trouble was stirring her heart and firing her veins, and making her altogether unlike herself.

It was while she was looking over her pile of correspon-

dence that Lord Montdesne came; her greeting was so flurried and constrained, so different from its usual grave, sweet serenity, that I think he noticed it, though he said nothing.

She moved restlessly about the room. She spoke with a mocking grace and a cynical coldness of the thousand and one things they usually discussed, and her manner puzzled and perplexed him more and more each moment.

"I suppose you know Plas-Gledwyn is honoured by titled visitors?" she said at last.

"No, I do not. Who are they?" he said, as if surprised.

"Friends of yours—relations, I should say," Irene answered, with a cool, tranquil gaze at his face, as if to mark the effect of her words.

"Of mine?"

Try as he would to appear unmoved, I saw the dark flush that rose to his brow, the sudden anger in his eyes.

He approached her more nearly.

"Is it true, Irene? or are you saying this to vex me?"

"Why should I say it if it were not true?" she answered him coldly. "Your sister has come here."

He bent over her, and looked in her eyes with a new, fierce light glowing in his own. Apparently my presence was forgotten by them both in that moment.

"If she has come to vex you, Irene, it will be the worse for her," he said, in a voice which showed that some strong emotion was battling with his ordinary calm courtesy. "I have not forgotten the mischief she did once; but your father was with you then, and——"

"And now I have no one, no one!" she cried out in a voice of such anguish that it brought the hot, unbidden tears to my eyes as I heard it, and robbed him of all his self-command.

"No one?" he murmured passionately, as he drew her suddenly in his arms. "You have *me*, my love! my love!"

As the words left his lips the door opened, and Margaret's voice announced—

"LADY CISSITER!"

CHAPTER VI.

MY KING—MY LORD.

I THINK no stage *tableau* could have surpassed the one in that little summer parlour, after the announcement of Margaret.

Lord Montdesne drew back from Irene's side, and turned haughtily and angrily to the door. As for my darling herself, her face grew deadly white, her slight frame trembled visibly; but in her eyes still glowed the love-light his words had kindled, though a certain timidity shadowed them now, as if she feared this new joy that had come to her at his words, his glance, his touch.

"Ah, Claude! *charmée de vous voir*," said the cool, tranquil voice of Lady Cissiter. "Miss Vernon, delighted to renew our acquaintance. So surprised to find you here. Saw your name in the 'Visitors' List.' Hope you're well; you look delicate. Fatiguing life the stage; you find it so, doubtless?"

Then she took Irene's reluctant hand and sat down beside her, with a coolness and *savoir-faire* that amused and astonished me at one and the same moment.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Isabel," said her brother, coldly. "I had no idea your were coming to Wales."

"No?" she questioned, raising her eyebrows. "Well, I didn't think my movements would interest you, *mon cher*. Dreadful bore to have to come here; such a dull place. But the doctors recommended it for Aubrey, and of course maternal feeling outvies every other consideration."

"Even in *your* mind?" he said, with a certain incredulity in his voice that angered her, despite her efforts at calmness.

"Do you make a long stay, Miss Vernon?" she questioned, disregarding her brother's inquiry.

"It depends on my health," said Irene. "I have been very ill; in fact, am far from strong yet."

"Dear me—so sorry," went on the cold, metallic voice, in just the same accents that had proclaimed she was "so charmed" a few minutes before. "Then you don't go out much. Is there anything to be done here? Doesn't seem so. I suppose one bathes, and rides, and shops—just exists! I shall be bored to death in a week, I'm sure."

"I wonder you came," said her brother.

"For Aubrey's sake, you know," she answered, smiling complacently. "But *you*, Claude, whatever do you do here, and where do you stop? Not at the Hotel, for I didn't see your name, I know."

"I have rooms. I only run down now and then," he said, looking a little embarrassed, I thought, at her questions.

"Ah, I see; and—oh, really, I beg pardon, I never observed that young lady in the corner. Friend of yours, Miss Vernon?"

"Dolly, ten thousand pardons!" exclaimed Irene, flushing hotly. "I quite forgot you were there. Yes, Lady Cissiter, a friend of mine, as you say. Let me introduce you; Miss Clark—Lady Cissiter."

I bowed, and the great lady fixed her eye-glass in her eye and honoured me with a solemn stare ere she returned my salute. After which she seemed again to become unconscious of my presence.

A most uncomfortable half hour now passed. It was evident enough how unwelcome one of the visitors was, but apparently she had no intention of relieving us of her company. Lord Montdesne, on the other hand, seemed equally determined to stay as long as she did. Was it to shield Irene from annoyance? I wondered.

Lady Cissiter talked well and brilliantly, but with a certain shallowness and superficiality that I disliked. She gave me the impression of being very hard and cold. Her sentences were all spiced with sarcasm, her platitudes were thoroughly unmeaning, her politeness forced. Her

object in thus inflicting her society upon us was incomprehensible.

At last she rose to go.

"You will come with me, Claude?" she asked him, in a certain peremptory tone, that rather enforced a command than questioned his inclination to obey it.

And he, with one brief, hesitating glance at Irene's downcast eyes, said simply—

"If you wish it."

"Oh, Dolly, Dolly!" cried my darling, as she turned to me, half glad, half tearful, when the door had closed on her visitors, "how thankful I am she is gone! What will she say, though, when she hears?"

"Hears what?" I questioned softly, as the beautiful, blushing face was coyly hidden on my shoulder.

"Hears that he loves me," she whispered shyly and proudly. "My king, my lord—what am I, that he should stoop to me?"

But as I heard those glad, triumphant words, a pang shot through my heart. She loved him so well, she thought of no obstacles, no difficulties. All the freshness and fervour of her heart had been so long poured out and yielded to him, that now she knew herself loved again there was no room for any other feeling save that one supreme joy.

All those bright morning hours I listened to the glad outpourings of that young innocent heart—listened with silent sympathy, but with ever that chill of fear and dread for her future, as I saw how her lover's words had opened the flood-gates of a nature at once passionate, intense, and devoted.

Every word, every accent, betrayed it. She loved him with the sweetness, highest, and most innocent faith; with such a love as men seldom win, as women rarely yield; such love as meant a future wrecked or a future blessed: such love as was contained in the genius of a poet's nature—the pure trust of an innocent child and the worshipping, exhaustless passion of a true-hearted woman.

Well might I tremble as I read it, well might I fear for her as I saw this jewel of price cast down at the feet of a man who might fail to appreciate its worth, yet in whose power alone it would lie to trample it in the dust of degradation, or honour it at its true value.

Which would he do? I wondered. His nature was so different from hers.

The sins and follies of life had bound him so long and so closely, while by her they were alike unknown and unfeared. Could the world shake off these trammels, and be content to resign all for her? Could the world which had absorbed him so long be secondary at last? Could the dreams of his youth return, and nobler ambitions and purer faiths, and unselfish aims, return with them? Could *her* influence lead him to things higher, holier, happier than those which had so long contented him? These were the questions I asked myself from time to time! Alas! these, too, were the questions I could not, and dared not answer.

* * * * *

With the evening he returned to us again. I left them to themselves. I was not wanted now, I knew. I would not intrude on these first sweet hours, this golden day-break of a love that was so young and' glad and beautiful a thing to her. Was it so to him?

Ah me! I feared not. Is love ever the same to a man as to a woman? Has it the same sacred awe and pure delight and dreamful tenderness for him as it has for her? Does it make the air lighter, the earth lovelier, and life holier and full of sweet content, that is coloured and warmed by beautiful fancies and noble pride in the object loved, no matter how unworthy it seems to other eyes?

Being a woman I only ask the question—I have never heard the answer yet.

So on this evening that had all the warmth of the dying summer, and all the glamour of living passion, and the

rose-glow of awakened love, to make it one for ever remembered by them, I wandered away solitary and unthought of.

The deep azure of the sky was above them, and the deeper azure of the sea lay at their feet. There were clusters of stars in the heavens, and clusters of flowers and climbing roses, and late honeysuckles, around the cottage railings. Everywhere the scents and fragrance of the night, and in their hearts—love!

And yet—and yet I, knowing all, and seeing all, felt a chill touch of dread, a fear of the very happiness that seemed so perfect and so fair to them.

I never again saw a garden in the starlit glow of the late summer, or heard the calm, slow roll of the breaking waves on the moonlit sands, without a passion of remembrance, sharp as death, without a passion of regret in my aching heart; for I remembered *this* night and what followed!

CHAPTER VII.

OFF THE STAGE

"He cannot come to-day," said Irene sorrowfully, as she came downstairs next morning. "He goes to London again."

"And his sister?" I questioned, as I drew her chair up to the daintily-spread table.

She flushed hotly.

"I hope she will not come again; I do not want her."

"He will tell her, I suppose?" I asked, as I handed the coffee-cup across to where she sat, looking so sad and sweet in her soft black robes, that only added to the fairness of her skin and the lustrous gleam of her hair.

"Of course;" and the little head was raised proudly, and the dark eyes looked at me in surprise. "Why should he keep it secret? They do not love each other much; but she is his only living relation. She has a right to know."

"She will not like it," I said, feeling troubled and perplexed, I scarcely knew why. "She is so proud and haughty."

My darling's merry laugh stopped my words.

"I know; but what of that? He is free to please himself, and he has chosen *me*."

Such sweet joy, such tender triumph shone in her face, that I gazed at her in awe. Love had transfigured her. Her past life looked barren and empty in comparison with this new and wonderful happiness—the happiness that had come to her with the glance of his eyes, the whispers of his love; and she had no fear. He was hers—hers only! The mockery of the world, the coldness of society, the sneers and opposition of friends or relations, all were unthought of, and undreaded by her. He was free to choose, and he had chosen—her!

This was the burden of her thoughts, this the substance of her every word throughout the day. She was his equal by birth, if not in rank; she was a pure, noble, gifted woman; and yet—oh, how well I knew what his world would say! How deeply I dreaded the chill breath of scorn and wonder, of courteous contempt and haughty arrogance, which I feared even his name and honours could not avert from her.

For the world looks never below the surface, and to the world she was "only an actress!"

But she was blind and happy—so perfectly and entrancedly happy—that I could not breathe a whisper of sorrow that might shadow, or pain that might crush this new and marvellous joy; and the hours passed, while his name was ever on her lips and hidden in her heart, and I but listened and sighed.

With the noon the heat grew sultry and the sky dark

Signs of storm and tempest were around, and the heavy oppressive atmosphere made my head ache and throb, till at last she told me I looked ill, and must lie down and rest.

I obeyed her willingly enough, and went into the cool, shady little boudoir that opened out from the parlour, and was only separated from it by curtains. Here, on the couch by the open windows, I lay down, while my darling arranged my pillows and bathed my hot forehead, and tended me with the gentle ministry of love and care.

At last, soothed by the cool essences and shaded light, I fell asleep.

Whether my slumbers had been long or short I do not know. I was awakened suddenly by a loud peal of thunder, and started up, feeling giddy and confused, but free from pain now. Then, as I sat there, pushing back the falling hair from my eyes and brow, I heard the sound of voices in the room adjoining.

There was ~~no~~ mistaking those cold, clear accents; I recognised them instantly. Lady Cissiter was here again.

A vague trouble fell upon me. Why had she come?

As the thought crossed me, I heard Irene say, calmly and distinctly—

"I think you are mistaken, Lady Cissiter, in speaking to me thus. Has your brother not told you I am to be his wife?"

For one moment dead silence reigned.

Then, across the stillness, fell a sound that made me shiver. It was the chill, sneering laugh of a merciless woman—a laugh that filled up the pause between those words and her answer more brutally than any gibe or jest.

"*His wife!* Are you mad, girl? His mistress, perhaps—nay, even that is too much honour!"

I started to my feet, my first impulse being to fly to my darling's side, to protect her from such shameful insults—such cruel scorn.

But, on second thoughts, I stayed. What could I do by interference? what but bring down by my own presence,

fresh impertinences on her; for I remembered who I was, and trembled, lest this ruthless woman should know it too.

The voice of Irene, with its proud, serene utterance, answered her foe at last.

"If you have come here but to insult me, madam, you have effected your purpose well. A defenceless orphan—an unprotected woman—has nothing wherewith to oppose such words as those you have just uttered, save—her silence and contempt."

"You are not on the stage now," said her tormentor; "and what I have to say I *will* say ere I leave your presence. You tell me he is your lover—that may be. Many women have said it before you—to their cost. But what wild dream, what Quixotic fancy, has possessed you to think that he will make you his wife? His wife—pshaw! Are you one fit to wear his honours, and carry his titles, and make the world respect or honour him? Ask yourself. Do you know what harm lies in your power to do to him? Do you know that, in the eyes of the world—*his* world—you will make him a thing of scorn, and mockery, and contempt? Do you know—or are you, indeed, so foolish and so blind—that since your first appearance on the boards of his theatre you have been, in the eyes of all men, only his mistress? Will you drag him further down? Will you show him as your dupe and tool to the society that will scorn both him and you? He may never reproach you, true; and he may even, in his folly and infatuation, be mad enough to give you his name, and his honour, and call you—wife! But if you take advantage of his weakness; if you are content to let him abide by his folly, then you make him a by-word, and a jest, among his friends; you do him the worst and cruellest wrong it is in woman's power to do! You say you love him—is this love? Nay, it is rather a foolish pride for your own welfare—a foolish wish for your own security—that has no regard for what he will suffer in the future, so that you are safe, and can bear his name, and pretend you have escaped—dishonour!"

"Oh, cease! cease!

The wild, pained words escaped her tortured lips at last, and nerved me with such strength as a mother might feel for her suffering child, seeing it wronged, knowing it innocent!

I tore aside the curtains. I stood before them both! I saw the proud and haughty woman whom the world honoured—the woman who had sold her beauty, and her youth, for the empty baubles of wealth and rank! I saw the wife whose lord hated and shunned her—who had no place in his affections, no interests in his life, yet who bore his name, and ruled his house, and caressed his children, and entertained his friends, and was counted by the world—happy! And there, before her, stood the young, girlish, innocent creature she had arraigned as a sinner!

My darling's face was white as death; one hand was pressed close to her heart, and, oh, the agony and the pain on that beautiful brow—in those despairing eyes, and blanched and quivering lips!

"Are you a woman?" I cried, in breathless indignation, as I wound my arms around the slender form, and drew the white, stricken face to my breast, and faced her foe in my bitter indignation and senseless wrath. "Are you a woman, and seek to kill a pure and innocent girl with such vile words as those you have just uttered?"

"She has a worthy champion in you," retorted Lady Cissiter, scornfully. "A ballet-dancer, picked up in the streets! Faugh! I am ashamed that even interest in my brother's welfare should bring me into such company."

"You forced yourself into it," I said, with a pride as great as her own, yet with a humiliation and anguish for the trembling girl, who clung to me so despairingly, that her foe could not know or guess.

She looked at us both with a fierce, malicious pleasure.

"In the interests of our family and its honour—yes. But I have said, I hope, enough to convince Miss Vernon how utterly impossible it is for Lord Montdesne to marry her,

If she doubt me, let her ask him how he can, in honour, break off with the lady he is engaged to wed?"

My darling started, and shivered as with deadly cold.

"It is not true," she wailed, in a feeble, broken-hearted voice. "There is no other!"

Lady Cissiter drew her cashmere scarf around her shoulders, and laughed her chill, merciless laugh once more.

"Excuse me—there *is* another. He is with her to-day. If you wish for proof, you will see it announced in the 'forthcoming marriages in high life' in this *Court Journal*."

She threw a paper down on the table before us. Then, with a bow, which neither of us returned, she swept from the room in the pride of her triumph.

They say that men, even the worst men, have some grain of pity in their nature. I doubt if it can be said of women; certainly not of such women as Lady Cissiter!

CHAPTER VIII

"THIS IS YOUR HONOUR?"

LEFT once more with me, Irene drew herself from my arms, and seized the paper on the table. I tried to take it from her trembling hands.

"Do not look at it, dear," I entreated. "Why should you believe this woman's words? She is jealous. You said yourself she hated you, and of course she wishes to prevent her brother marrying you. It is only nautral."

"No, no," she cried, "it is true—all too true! Oh, why was I so blind, I could not see it long ago? Why had I to hear the truth from *her*? I might have known—ah! yes, I might have known."

What might she have known? I asked myself. The

hateful truths the world in its wisdom had proclaimed, and still proclaims; the wrong that is right, the truth that is falsehood, the law of *honour* that forbids a man to wed the woman who is pure, and innocent, and loving, because she is beneath him in social rank; and holds her betrayed, her ruin, even her death by him, a mere venial error to be pitied and forgiven?

What is this she might have known, and knew at last, too late?

I looked at her as she stood erect before me, her whole face changed, and blanched, and pain-stricken; and, as I looked, her eyes caught the fatal words her foe had told her she would find.

An unutterable horror seemed to seize her as the paper fell from her hands.

"He is false!"

That was all she said. But with those words she laid down all the joys and peace that had made her life so beautiful; all the faith in *him* that had given her such fearless dignity in the presence of the woman who had scorned her; all the gladness and glory of a heart that had deemed itself one with his, and now awoke—to desolation.

Erect, mute, and motionless she stood, and I—I could neither speak, nor weep, nor comfort her. I saw the colour fade from her cheeks, the light from her eyes, the warmth and beauty from her face. I saw it; and as my arms were stretched to clasp her, and my lips parted in one bitter cry of dread, and agony, and pain, she reeled, and fell at my feet like a dead and stricken thing.

* * * * *

Throughout that day she neither moved nor spoke, but lay cold and motionless where we had carried her, in her pretty white chamber. All my efforts at consolation were fruitless. She had but one thought—that her love was a thing which would shame him and lower him in the world's eyes, and, therefore, sooner or later in his own.

Only a brief while before a rapture so perfect had entranced her, a passion so exquisite had filled her heart and soul, and now—now the whole force of a hideous truth had been hurled at her with a hateful, merciless cruelty. Now, she hated herself for the wrong she might have done him, deeming it no harm. Now she despised him that he had lacked the courage to tell her what all the world knew and she had never guessed.

A baser nature, or one less highly strung, more steeped in self, would have cared nought so that her own happiness, her own peace was secure; but not so Irene.

That he loved her she did not doubt; but that he loved her weakly, imperfectly, she knew now. His promise had been given to wed another, and that other was a more fitting wife for him than the girl who had saved his ruined future, and wrecked her own power and reputation in the effort.

"He shall be free!" I heard her say, below her breath, as she lay so white and still on her couch. "Free to wed her. The world shall honour him still!"

And I—hearing the heart-broken words, and knowing some of the agony she was suffering so silently—I turned away, and wept such tears as for myself I had never shed.

With nightfall a resolve formed itself in my mind. I would myself see Lord Montdesne and tell him of his sister's work. I would hear, too, from his own lips, whether this report was true of his projected marriage. Rumour lies so often—and rumour might have taken for granted an alliance which society deemed desirable, and to which fashion and rank both pointed.

On the plea of business connected with the theatre, I left Wales that night, and at noon next day presented myself at Lord Montdesne's chambers, which looked out on St. James's Park. Irene had asked no questions of me when I left her; the heavy stupor of exhaustion still held her in its chains; the suffering that had come to her so suddenly in the midst of her joy still weighted mind and heart to the exclusion of all else. So I had placed her

in Margaret's charge, promising to be back, if possible, the next night.

* * * * *

"Lord Montdesne was at home," said the servant who answered my summons. "Would I give my name?"

I did so, and a few minutes afterwards the man returned and desired me to follow him.

I was shown into an apartment, strangely luxurious it seemed to me for a man! Works of art, things of antiquity and beauty—pictures, bronzes, marble, china—all that appertained to artistic excellence and masculine comfort—were littered about in splendid confusion. The picturesque charm, the grace and ease, and beauty of arrangements, exquisite in their very carelessness and negligence, all bespoke the refined taste of a gentleman and a *connoisseur*. For a moment I felt shy and ill-at-ease at my situation. What excuse had I to offer? What plea to give for seeking in his own private rooms this rich and aristocratic young nobleman? While the uneasiness and restraint were still upon me, the door opened and Lord Montdesne entered.

"What is it, Dolly?" he asked eagerly. "Nothing wrong at the cottage, I hope?"

"No, my lord." I said quietly, hiding my trembling as best I could. "Not exactly; I came to ask a question."

"A question? It must be a very important one to bring you all the way from Wales to London. What is it? But, stay—will you have any refreshment—tea—or fruit—or wine? It is all here."

"No, thank you," I said, while the ease and frankness of his manner increased my perturbation. "I want nothing. I have come all this way for no light or trivial reason, as you may suppose, my lord. I want to ask you if it is true what your sister told Miss Vernon yesterday, that you are engaged to be married to another lady?"

He started, and his face grew white as death.

"My sister—you say—she told Irene *that*——" he stammered.

His confusion gave me confidence. "She did. It needs but a word from you to settle the matter. Yes, or no, my lord?"

He hesitated.

"Dolly," he said hurriedly, "you told me once you were her friend. I said then, and I say again, I may put your friendship to a severe test. I love her—that you know; but, a few months ago, when ruin stared me in the face, and I was half mad with the shame and fear of exposure, I rashly promised my sister that I would wed this heiress—*her* friend. I thought—I mean—I never believed that Irene cared for me as I afterwards found she did, and when I knew she loved me I was carried away by the impulse of the moment. I forgot all ties—prudence, restraint. I could not deny myself the joy that her confession gave—her beauty and her genius have entranced me so long, and then——"

He stopped, for the scorn in my eyes, and the anger on my face, put to shame all his paltry excuses, and silenced them there and then.

"So," I said, "this is your honour, my lord? This girl has loved you with the sweetest, highest, devotion of a noble woman. You talk of ruin—has she not saved you from ruin? Has she not brought back to you the wealth you squandered on that costly toy—your theatre? Has she not done more for you a thousand times than any living being—and all because she loved you? And now you so little care for the gift you have won—for the beauty, and genius, and devotion cast at your feet, that you trample them down in the dust for the sake of—gold!"

"You do not understand," he said; "one has no chance to do what one would or ought in society. The rules of my order bind me to the world. I cannot trample them under foot. My career has not been a very noble one; but believe me, Dolly, there is no single thing in it I regret so much as the wrong I have done Irene Vernon."

"Why did you tell her you loved her?" I said bitterly, for my heart ached with the pain and shame that was falling on my darling; it seemed to me that under it she could not live.

"I told you before," he said humbly. "Oh! Dolly, believe me, I stand even in my own sight to-day as something utterly base and selfish, and yet what can I do?"

"What can you do?" I said, coldly looking up at the handsome, troubled face before me, with a scorn of its weakness and falsity too intense for any words to express. "Do just what you have intended all along, my lord. Amuse yourself while the fancy lasts, take from the girl who is as far above you in honour and purity as you are below her in your selfish fears, her good name, her best gifts, her whole life's tenderness and love, and then walk on in your own path to wealth and happiness, over the ruins of a broken heart!"

"Oh, not so! not so! she will forget; she will see in time that I was compelled to act as I have done, that——"

"It will be a strange day when she sees that you were *compelled* to woo her love, and wreck her fair fame for the amusement of an idle hour," I interrupted scornfully. His face flushed.

"That is not true; but you are a woman and you judge harshly—how should you know of the exigencies of the social laws that hold men, and compel them—to——"

"To call dishonour by a fairer name, my lord—that of convenience."

He bit his lip angrily.

"You must think what you please, Dolly, if you will not believe my excuses. To put the matter in plainer words than I had meant to use to a woman, do you think it possible that I should make my wife one whom the world has long counted as—my mistress?"

"How *dare* you use that word in connection with her?" I cried in passionate fury. "Have you neither pity nor shame for the wrong you have done, and yet might amend?"

"I cannot, if I would."

"Be it so," I answered contemptuously. "I thank you for the lesson you have taught me to-day, my lord. My opinion of men is none the higher for it. I will only say that it is well for you that Irene's father is in his grave, ere ever he had lived to see the man he honoured, bring such shame and suffering on his only child!"

For an instant those words robbed him of his self-command, and pierced through the armour of his selfishness and worldliness.

"I am indeed base," he said, with a humility that touched me with an infinite shame for him. "Whatever words you say of me, Dolly, are none too harsh!"

"May I ask what you had intended to do if—if your sister had not so kindly taken the initiative?" I asked coldly. "You left Wales as Irene's accepted lover. Do you return to her to tell her of your falsity? I dare not!"

The words ended in a sob that caught my breath, for I thought of the mute, agonized face I had seen in the little cottage parlour, of the stricken form that lay so patiently and uncomplainingly on its couch of suffering, with a heart breaking for this faithless lover's sake.

"I will see her, though I would rather face death than her reproaches, Dolly! I have no excuse to offer. I must tell her the plain truth. My love is hers for ever. My promise, alas! is another's."

For one instant the knowledge of what that truth would be to her, nerved me with sudden strength to plead for her as I never could have borne to hear her plead for herself.

"Oh, my lord," I said, "can you not, for once, throw off the trammels of habit? Can you not, for once, be brave enough to declare yourself no longer a slave to the society you despise? It needs but an effort of will. It needs but to show yourself not—what your order believes you to be. One effort, and you are free—one word, and you make two lives happy instead of wrecking the future of both, for you know—you must know—what you are to

her; and if you have one-tenth part the love for her that she holds for you, you can never be happy with the woman for whose wealth you barter your own honour."

My words moved him as nothing I had said before had seemed to do. Perhaps the vision of his sister's unhappy splendid life rose before him, and in contrast to that shone a future that might be so bright for him with the love and companionship of the beautiful, gifted girl, who had no fault or sin to answer for, save social inferiority.

A softness came into the haughty eyes—a tender smile curved the weak, womanish lips that always seemed to me to mar the handsome face.

"I might be happy—true," he said, dreamily. "And yet the world—what would it say? Who would receive her?"

"Need *you* care for that?" I asked. "Is your name not mighty enough to weigh down what the world says?—to defend your wife's honour? I always thought a man raised the woman he married to his own rank, let her be ever so inferior. In time the world would forget that she had once been an actress. Her own stainless character would defy the tongues of malice. Of aught else—the happiness it might bring, the life it might save—you can judge best."

"I can—I will!" he said, with sudden emphasis. "Dolly, I thank you for your words. Severe as your rebukes have been, I merited them. For once I will trample down the paltry superstitions of race and rank. For once I will be true to my own instincts! Let the world say what it may, I will not break my darling's heart for any sneer or scorn that may descend on me. Leave me now, Dolly. Do not fear that I shall recant my determination. To-morrow, at noon, I shall be with you once more—to-morrow I shall win back my darling's smiles, and tell her what my heart has long told me—that she is the only woman in all the world whom I could ever love."

My heart thrilled with gladness at his words. For once it seemed to me they bore the ring of truth—the stamp of sincerity

"*Will* you come?" I said, joyfully. "*Really?*"

"Really. I give you my word of honour."

And I foolishly believed him, never thinking that the honour he pledged so readily had been falsified once, and might be so again.

I stayed no longer. I had pleaded, prayed, upbraided, as I had never dreamt I had courage to do. I only bowed my head in silent farewell, and followed the servant he had summoned down the wide stairway, and so passed from his presence, and found myself in the street below.

My thoughts were vague, confused, bewildered. I tried to believe in him, and yet I doubted. I knew a word, a glance, a caress, would sooth Irene's fears, and win back her confidence; but then she loved, and I only—mistrusted.

I knew more of evil—more of the sins and shames and follies of men's and women's lives than she did, and I knew that the mists of such things had been around him for long years of self-indulgence. I knew that they were about him still, and that, perhaps, too darkly for the light of a woman's love to penetrate and disperse; for the world had held him so closely always, and—could he forget it now? That tired, listless temperament that had so long trampled on the weakness of emotion, and the purer instincts of a once noble heart, where would it find strength to banish its old superstitions, or let its ideal of truth and beauty reign supreme over a long-indulged selfishness?"

Could Irene's eyes beckon him to fairer regions than those over which the senses and follies of his baser nature reigned supreme. Could the self-negation for which he struggled, rise conquered over the temptings of lower feelings long indulged, and now, for the first time, to be denied? I feared not.

I had left him to fight out the victory with himself alone—unaided. I took back with me on my lonely journey a freight of fears, in which hope held but small place, for my instincts showed me, even then, how wide a margin lay between a woman's love, and—a man's!

How strange a society we live in, when the crime of immorality is held as so trivial an error, and the better, purer instincts that deny desire, and restrain passion, and exalt the beloved as something higher than a tool for intrigue, or a plaything for the moment, are ridiculed as madness.

Thoughts like these coursed through my brain as I took my way towards the station, for I had no desire to stay away from Irene an hour longer than was absolutely necessary.

When I reached it I found I had half-an-hour to wait ere my train was due, and I roamed up and down in restless impatience, longing only for the time to arrive when I might be once more with her, full of perplexed, uneasy misgivings as to what might have happened in my absence.

As I stood there, a train arrived on the opposite side of the platform, and my eyes followed its movements with the careless indifference of an inattentive and preoccupied mind. What did I see that arrested my attention, and fixed my gaze with an eagerness as great as its former indifference? Only the handsome liveries, the obsequious attendants, the stir, and bustle, and excitement, of some important and expected arrival. I knew instinctively who it was.

The liveries, the servants, the waiting carriages—all I had seen before as the appurtenances of a degraded wealth, and a lavish ostentation! Following the movements of the passengers who left the carriages, my eyes soon singled out *one*. The haughty, imperious stare, the cold, ungracious dignity I knew so well, and hated so thoroughly, were before me once more.

It was Lady Cissiter and her *suite* who had come by the noon-day train, following too swiftly on my own steps to leave me free from anxiety or dread.

My heart sank as I saw her. Was she bound on the same errand that had brought me thither? Was her presence here an omen of ill again? Could the weak and easily biassed nature of her brother withstand her argu-

ments and entreaties, and be firm still to his plighted word and his pledged honour?

I had doubted it before. I doubted it doubly now—with what reason, I was soon to discover!

It was late that night when the express brought me once more to the little Welsh seaside place which fashion had lately decreed of importance, and which held now more visitors than ever it had done before.

With feverish impatience I hastened to the cottage, all dark and silent now in the hush of the midnight hour.

Old Margaret answered the door, and admitted me with a heartfelt welcome.

"How is she?" I asked breathlessly, as I entered the tiny, familiar hall.

"Just the same, miss. She has neither moved nor spoken since you left, and I cannot get her to taste food. Oh, miss, I do hope you bring some better news!"

"Yes—I hope so," I said wearily. "He has promised to come."

"Thank God!" said the faithful creature, eagerly. "Oh, Miss Dolly, it is a terrible thing to be so wrapped up in a human creature, as she is in her lover, though he be a grand gentleman, sure enough, and a fine one, and good and true, as well!"

Good and true!

I sighed heavily as I heard the words. My heart could not echo them, for a foreboding of ill had taken possession of me, that nothing could shake off.

I sat by my darling's side throughout that weary night. I tried to whisper words of comfort in her ears, but I do not think she even heard me.

With the next day's noon I set myself, with strained ears and beating heart, to watch for his arrival. If he kept word with me, he would be here then. Alas! the slow, bright hours crept on, the noon changed to evening, the dusk to darkness, and still he never came. Then I knew, at last, my fears were realized. Then I knew, with an agony of shame, and fury, and regret, that my

words had been of no avail; that his weakness had triumphed; that the slavery of long habit held him too securely for any true or noble impulse to break its chains.

And I was right.

CHAPTER IX.

"SORCERY."

"If he would but come," I thought to myself as day after day passed, and we neither saw nor heard aught of him.

"Was he so faithless and unworthy?" I wondered, noting with heavy heart my darling's sorrowful eyes, and pale, sad face.

For she was utterly changed.

A darkness like the blank that death had left, seemed to have settled on her life. Her nights were sleepless; a deadly apathy seemed to keep her powerless and motionless throughout those long, bright summer days, and all the time he made no sign and wrote no word, and she suffered dumbly, hopelessly, alone.

Every day she grew thinner, paler, weaker; every day she wept more and spoke less, and I watched her with an agony of dread and an ever-increasing fear. Watched her—dumb, and powerless, and heart-sick, because my love could do nothing for her, because a chill and fearful horror lay upon my heart.

One day, quite suddenly, she made up her mind to leave Wales and return to London. Our preparations were speedily made, and with the hope that change of scene might do her some good, and rouse her from that apathy into which she had fallen, I saw her set out. All this time we had heard nothing from Lord Montdesne. His sister had left the day after her interview with Irene, and I had little

doubt but that she had joined him, and that to her interference or control, his silence was attributable.

When Irene was once more settled in her own pretty house, I would have left her, but this she would not hear of.

"Stay with me always, Dolly;" that was her cry. "You are the only one left."

And though I feared my presence might do her harm, though I dreaded the scandals that might envenom our friendship, and poison its peace, I had no heart to deny her wish. I stayed.

Soon the old desire for study and employment began to usurp her thoughts. The new play was being got ready for rehearsal, and the manager wrote to know when she would come down to the theatre.

She handed me the letter, and turned very white.

"Will *he* be there, do you think?" she asked. "I cannot meet him."

I could not answer her with any certainty; but I told her I would go down to the theatre and ascertain, if possible, whether he was in town.

I found that the theatre had been newly decorated and arranged. It looked charming now. The hangings were of rose-coloured satin and white lace; the boxes fitted up like tiny *boudoirs*; the musicians were to play out of sight; and the dressing-rooms were neat and tasteful, while that set apart for Irene was a model of daintiness and comfort on the tiniest scale.

"Lord Montdesne had ordered it," the manager told me, and I smiled as he said it. I wondered if he, too, thought there was something more than friendship between the great actress and the lordly lessee.

"Is Lord Montdesne here?" I questioned carelessly.

"Oh, no! he has gone abroad. You have heard he is to be married soon, I suppose, to the daughter of the Earl of Farquhar—very rich heiress—Scotch family; a good thing for him, I should think."

"He won't be here for some time, I suppose?" I asked again. "Not at the rehearsals, at all events?"

"Oh, no," said Mr. Watkins, indifferently; "he won't be taking such an interest in his theatre now, I expect. In any case he must mind his P.'s and Q.'s, for the Earl is a mighty particular old gentleman, and his daughter takes after him. They are an old Scotch family, you know, one of the kirk and canticle set. My lord won't like it long, I'm thinking."

I may as well mention now that I had been promoted from burlesque acting to a part in the new drama, thanks to Irene's interest, and therefore Mr. Watkins was more condescending to me than of yore.

I heard all he had to say, and then went sadly back to the pretty *maisonnette* where my darling awaited me. I told her Lord Montdesne was away, but I said nothing of his projected marriage, nor did she.

How he could have been so utterly base I know not. He had won her love; he had confessed his own; he had asked her to wait but a few short months and he would make her his wife, and then—then he had left her. Left her with no word, no sign, no explanation; left her to hear from strange lips of his faithlessness and lack of truth; left her to hear, with failing strength and a breaking heart, the knowledge of his perfidy.

She lived now in deeper solitude than ever. Rarely would she stir from the house, even at my most earnest beseeching. She never showed herself in the Park, or the "Row," or the fashionable streets of the Great City. She shrank from every sight and sound of human life in the busy world around, and people talked as they would.

"Does she act this season?"

"Yes, in the new drama—'Sorcery.'"

"But where is she now?"

"Oh—ah—well, it is said with—him."

"No better than the rest, you see."

And then everybody laughed, well pleased to have something to say of the great actress who had enthralled them once, and who had dared to be celebrated and—innocent.

But she loved him so perfectly and utterly; she never reproached him even now.

"He might have written—once," she had said to me, and that was all.

But he did not write, and he did not come, and he was to marry a great lord's daughter when the Easter lilies bloomed. And I saw my darling droop and fade, and could neither help nor comfort her, though I would have given my life to do it; and I knew—ah, so well—so well, with the great dread and pain of dying hope, that never again would her life rejoice, and her heart live, for he had killed her youth for ever.

Sadly I watched her studying her new part, for despite all my entreaties she had determined upon fulfilling her engagement.

"I have strength enough, and pride enough, still," she said, with that wan, wistful smile that was sadder than tears. "If I meet him, he shall never see that I have suffered for his faithlessness."

Never see? Ah, God! When to look at the white face and the sorrowful eyes, and the weary drooping grace of the once erect and beautiful figure, was to see such tokens of suffering as would wring any one's heart that had loved her, ever so little, once.

She was always pacing her little study now, the book in her hand, her eyes fixed on the floor, her lips murmuring, from time to time, the beautiful poetic words.

The piece was a clever and highly dramatic one, by a new author, founded on the old story of a man's weakness and a woman's trust and love. Despite his better reason, his efforts to be true, the hero is beguiled by a beautiful but vile woman from his real love and the struggle between *his* baseness and weakness, between *her* worshipping trust and ruined happiness, were the chief attractions of the plot, and gave full scope for Irene's gifted powers of delineation.

I knew she would be perfect, fatally perfect, alas!

for the case was so like her own, and the portrayal came so naturally that it ceased to be acting.

The nearer the time came for the opening night, the more I dreaded it.

Irene's feverish energy pained and saddened me. Her whole thoughts seemed given now to her part, and it engrossed her to the exclusion, apparently, of every other feeling or desire. Yet, while the fire of genius burnt so fiercely within her, and all her energies were fanning it to brighter flames, the vital powers of her physical nature were growing weaker and weaker, the long strain was telling on her more and more.

No wonder I trembled as I looked at the shadowy form and the face whose spiritual beauty increased day by day while the hues of health faded slowly but surely from it.

One thing alone could have saved her—the knowledge of his truth—the certainty of his love. But both were lost now.

* * * * *

The night came at last. The night I dreaded so, for all its promise of triumph, for all its whispers of fame.

All day she had scarcely spoken, and with difficulty had I persuaded her to touch food. Only the most urgent entreaties had prevailed upon her at last, and with intense fear I saw how ill she looked, and how changed!

I think, in my heart, I almost cursed the man who had done her this cruel wrong; who had robbed her life of its youth, and her heart of its gladness, as a child might rob a bird of its song with the stone that brings it bruised and dying to his feet; thoughtlessly, perchance, but none the less surely.

It was late when we reached the theatre, and as I stood at the wings waiting for my cue, I saw the house was crowded from floor to roof; and I saw—with what shudder of horror and disgust I cannot describe—her

lover and his sister, and a party of friends, in the principal box. One lady—not young—but tall and handsomely dressed, was beside him; and some instinct told me this was the woman he was so soon to wed; the woman who, all unwittingly, stood before my darling's eyes as the destroyer of her hopes and happiness.

I trembled as I saw that laughing, careless group. If Irene saw them, would her powers fail? Could her strength bear up against an ordeal so great, a strain so terrible?

Half mad with doubt and fear I saw the curtain drawn up, I heard the plaudits and acclamations that thundered out a welcome to the favourite of the public.

I saw Lord Montdesne draw back in the shadowy corner of his box, and Lady Cissiter lean forward, a merciless exultation in her eyes, a smile of triumph on her lips.

But if Irene saw her, she gave no sign. The blood flushed her face at that warm and eloquent greeting. She moved, and spoke, and acted with yet more consummate art than I had anticipated, and as the curtain fell upon the first act I breathed one long, glad sigh of relief.

I thought the worst was over—oh, blind fool that I was!—when it had yet to come.

I sought her in her dressing-room, and found her leaning, white as marble, against her table.

"He is here!" she said to me; and I in wonder answered, "You knew it then, and could act thus?"

She laughed, a laugh that thrilled through my veins, and curdled my blood with horror. "It is ever the dying swan whose song is sweetest. Would you have me turn coward *now*?"

Again and again she swept on to that stage of triumph. Again and again did the thunder of acclamation rise to the roof and echo through the building. Success like this I had never witnessed. Success like this she had never won.

The author knelt before her in a perfect frenzy of adoration, and in broken, imperfect words, tried to thank

her; but she only listened like one in a trance. Her thoughts were far away.

It came to the last act, and in that I had nothing to do, so I stood aside to watch her. "It will soon be over," I said to myself: "very soon."

Would she have strength? Could she pass through the ordeal and claim the victory still?

The theatre was hushed to an intense breathless stillness. She was upon the stage now—alone.

Nothing more exquisite have I ever seen than that slight, white-robed figure, with the gleaming shower of hair tossed carelessly back from the young, pale face, and the dark, sad eyes looking wistfully out on the gazing crowd before her.

Her voice sounded across that awed and breathless silence with a pathos of passion and pain that brought the tears to countless eyes.

Ah! surely one at least in that vast audience must have read the meaning of those words by the light of his own weak perfidy, by the memory of that one night, when they had stood by the sapphire sea, and the roses had heard his false, imperfect vows.

"*I loved him as a woman loves but once,*" she said, in the words of the written piece, and the words of her own desolate heart. "*I gave him all—my thoughts, that were but echoes of his own—my dreams, my prayers, my life! He does not heed them now. I would have been his slave, his tool, his servant, so that his love were mine, as once it was. But now—ah, God! is there no death that dowers the broken-hearted?*"

As she ceased, one hoarse, choking sob fell across the dense and solemn silence—a man's sob. She heard it. She looked up to that seat where he was hidden—to that seat where her enemy's smiles had faded to gravity, and her rival's eyes were wet with tears.

A moment—then her arms fell nerveless to her side.

"My love!" she wailed; "my love!" And straight across the darkened stage she fell—dead.

L'ENVOI.

I AM an old woman now, and my hair is grey, and my face furrowed, but as I write these words and think of that awful night, my eyes grow dim with blinding tears; my hand trembles with the palsy that is not of age, but of some strong and passionate emotion.

In terror we had raised her; in frantic haste we summoned succour and medical aid.

But it was useless.

She was dead. Dead in her youth and genius and beauty. Dead, because of a man's perfidy and a woman's malice; though science said—of a weak heart. Her sinless eyes were closed—her sinless lips were silent; and when her lover came, in the frenzy of his madness and remorse, to the room where they had borne her, he knew too late what love he had won and lost.

Do you wish for more? I scarce have the power or the heart to tell it.

He married. Oh, of course. Are men faithful to woman's memory, think you? I have seen too much of the world to believe it. And doubtless he is happy, as the world counts happiness—for he has wealth, and fame, and honour, and a wife of stainless virtue and noble descent, and heirs to follow after him, and inherit his title and his rank.

Happy? oh yes! Though in a daisied churchyard, far away from the city's noise and din, there shines a pure white marble tomb with only the name of "Irene Vernon" on its surface.

Happy! oh yes! Though the secret treasures of an unfathomed love have been poured at his thankless feet by a woman, pure and noble as few women are.

"There was a story about him once!" says Society, with

polite curiosity, for he is a great man, and his doings are chronicled now with zealous care.

"Nothing much," says Echo, having caught stray sounds here and there, and liking to repeat them for its own amusement. "People did say he was in love with the girl who made such a hit in 'Sorcery,' but then, you know, there could be nothing in it—she was only an actress!"

WITH A SILVER LINING.

CHAPTER I.

"THE SHADOW OF THE CLOUD."

A GIRL came singing through a field of poppies as the sunset gilded the western sky.

Everywhere around her glowed the deep, intense scarlet of the brilliant blossoms. Above her head were depths of purple shadow and amber light, and over all brooded the dreamy stillness and tender hush that so often fills the day's last hour.

The girl made a fair picture amidst the glow and fervour of that sunset scene, as she moved through it all with a certain deer-like grace peculiarly her own, while her lips sang for very gladness, as a bird carols its matin praises in the dawn of a spring day. The song rang out sweet and clear over the quiet fields; it reached the ears of a group of farm labourers returning home from their work, and made them pause a moment to listen, saying, smiling to one another as they stood, "'Tis Miss Vera, sure eno'. God bless her!"

It came in its fresh young melody to a man who stood on the white level road beyond the corn-fields—a man, old and bent, and withered with age, with a hard, cold face and dreary eyes, who leaned on his stick, and shaded his sight from the sunrays, and watched the girl coming swiftly and joyously towards him, as he seldom had watched any human thing.

As she saw him the music left her tongue. Her step grew slower, and as his keen eyes swept over her face she half-paused, apparently doubting whether to speak or not. She knew him well by sight, but hitherto he had always avoided her.

"Singing again!" he said, in a voice as harsh and cold as his face. "Are you so glad? One never sees you without a smile on your lips—a song on your tongue."

She flushed slightly.

"Yes, I am glad," she answered simply.

"And why—can you tell me that? Have you so much to make you?"

"I have health, youth, love. Are they not life's fairest gifts?"

"So fools say."

"And wise men, too, I fancy," the girl said gently. "But whether or no, if they make one glad, should they not be valued? The old seem so often to think that the light-heartedness of youth is a reproach to themselves. I wonder why?"

"Do you mean that I think so?" he asked, with a contemptuous smile. "I envy none their youth—not even their gladness. I know how swiftly the one flies, the other fades. There is nothing good in life—the illusions of youth are the veriest vanity. Some day you too will say with me, 'There is nothing left; let me curse Heaven and die!'"

The girl's face grew very pale.

"Oh, never that!" she said sorrowfully. "Never words so despairing, or so—wrong!"

The last word was spoken gently and humbly. It was daring of her, she felt, to upbraid one so far beyond her in years, in knowledge, in experience.

"Wrong!" he said bitterly, as he stood and looked across the flaming scarlet of the poppies to where the last sun-rays lingered in the west. "What do you know of wrong or right—of life—of the future; of any one of the things that lie hidden in the heart of unfolded years

as the colour and fragrance of the flower lie in the closed bud? Listen!" And he laid his withered hand on her arm, and turned her bright young face towards him. "Listen, child! I was young once, and glad and trustful as you are. To me too there seemed never a cloud on the sky; never a pain in the heart; never an evil or a sin that could turn life to hell, and love to hate, and joy to sorrow. But even as that cloud above us creeps over the sky's radiance and covers the sunset's gold, so surely did a cloud of shame and suffering darken my fate, destroy my illusions. So surely will a like cloud throw its gloom over you, and every creature like you who goes forth on life's journey with blind eyes and credulous heart, to learn as I have learnt, that of all things life holds, the only thing that lives, and enjoys, and prospers, is—Evil."

She looked at him sorrowfully. He was so old, and sad, and desolate. His words hurt her; their chill darkened her simple joyousness, even as the cloud to which he had pointed darkened the glowing colours of the sky. For a moment she was silent.

"To say such words, and believe them," she said gently, "one must have known great sorrow. I do not understand them quite. God is too good to let mankind suffer more than they can bear, more than He deems just. But for you I am sorry. It must be so terrible to know life has no joy left, to turn from the sunshine and dwell for ever in the shadows."

A smile of terrible irony curved his lips.

"One need look for no worse hell hereafter. Do I frighten you? You look quite sacred and white. I cannot help it. I don't know why I have broken my word and spoken even gently to a human thing. I vowed once never to do it. I have seen you so often, and almost hated you for your fair face and your light step, and your voice that is always happy; and as you came across the fields just now some impulse prompted me to stay you. Is your gladness less?"

She smiled wistfully, and her eyes rested on his face with infinite pity.

"Not less," she said gently. "Only if I could but give you back yours—ever so little!"

"It lies in no man's power, still less in any woman's. The clouds are with me for ever now. Go you forth with the sun; our paths lie wide apart; for you, life begins—the joys it may hold are illimitable; for me it ends—the joys it has held are vanity and vexation of spirit. Farewell."

He turned abruptly away—a lean, bent, aged figure, leaning heavily on his stick, with the evening light touching his scanty silvered hair, and trembling form. The girl, moved by some sudden impulse, followed him.

"Do not shun me again," she said imploringly. "I have seen you so often, and I live so near; and they say you are always alone. It must be so sad."

"It is my own wish," he said almost fiercely. "As for being sad, one need not come to seventy years to find life that!"

Half proudly, half regretfully she turned away. As she did so her eyes rested on the pale soft tints of the evening sky, from whence the glow and fervour of sunset had faded.

"Look!" she cried eagerly, as her outstretched hand pointed upwards. "Look! the cloud is still there, but—*it has a silver lining.*"

The old man went on his way. The girl moved silently and sadly along the quiet fields, and through a narrow shady road, and across the wooden bridge which brought her to her home.

A very simple little place it was; a mere cottage, rented from a miller near by, and just large enough for her father and herself. He was an old and studious recluse, and she was his only child. He had lived here in this quiet world-forgotten village for a score of years, with only his books for companions since his wife had died and left his married life like a dream-memory to him ever afterwards—so short it was and sweet.

The tiny home was very dear to him, and to his child also. She loved to think of the fair young mother who had gladdened it for those two brief sunny years—to trace her footsteps in the garden-paths, her presence in the dainty rooms, her taste in the arrangements of the interior, and her skill in the miniature garden which she had planned and cultured, and where pure white lily-cups and Gloire de Dijon roses, and the scarlet glow of geraniums, and the flush of flowering creepers, coloured and embowered the tiny dwelling. To the girl the whole place was always beautiful in a simple, quiet, dreamy way, which had grown with her growth, and had altered itself to her fancies; whether it lay like a fairy bride-cake in winter, or a fragrant garden-world in summer, with azure and purple-winged butterflies sporting in the flower-bells, and the velvet-coated bees humming their endless song in the hearts of honey blossoms.

She and her father were always together—always companions and friends to each other—always united in interest as in heart, always inseparable in pursuits, both learned and simple.

As she crossed the wooden bridge now, she stood for an instant to listen to the rush and music of the deep mill-water, and to watch it break over the rocks, and dash in a million foam-bells against the huge wheel; then turning her eyes in the other direction, she saw a figure sitting at some distance up the bank fishing.

The sight was not an uncommon one; tourists and anglers often found their way here, and the deep river was full of pike and other smaller fish. Her eyes rested carelessly enough on this man, sitting motionless and attentively there with his rod clasped in his hands and his gaze fixed on the river before him. While she watched she saw him suddenly rise, retreat a few steps, and then with short, quick run, take a flying leap to a rock in the middle of the water, evidently intending to take his seat there, instead of fishing from the bank. Whether he had

measured the distance falsely, or whether his foot slipped on the slippery rock, she could not tell, but in a second she saw him submerged in the rushing depths, and whirled like a straw in her own direction.

"Great Heaven! the mill-wheel!" she gasped, standing paralyzed for an instant by the intense horror of that thought.

The current set firm and strong in that direction. In a moment he would be beneath the bridge on which she stood, and whirled onwards till the fierce waters would suck him into their whirlpool, and the cruel wheel would hold him in its grasp. The horror of the situation flashed through her brain like lightning. Without a moment's pause, she stooped under the railing of the bridge, which was so low it was within two feet of the water.

Holding on to one of the beams for support, she let herself drop, and as the water whirled him beneath, she seized the collar of his coat and held it fast.

The strain on her power was terrible. Her wrists were wrenched like a pulley as they supported his weight below and her own weight above. The sound of the water in her ears was like the roar of a furious sea. She cried aloud for help, with an agonized prayer in her heart that it might reach the miller or some of his labourers returning home.

The man was quite stunned; she could see a deep red gash on his forehead, which must have struck against the rock in that fatal leap. A moment more and she feared her strength would fail—a moment more and the river would hold two victims instead of one! A moment——

Oh, thank God! thank God! A shout in her ears—a strong clasp—a helping hand which seized the stiff and lifeless weight in her numbed and straining grasp. A moment and she was drawn back on the bridge, with a face white as death, and limbs that trembled like a wind-tossed leaf.

"'Tis Miss Vera from the cottage, as I live," said a voice. "Bless us and save us, what a thing for a young

weak thing like her to go and do! It's a mussy the two on 'em weren't drowned like kittens together! Wasn't it plucky though, Bill?"

The girl opened her eyes, and nerved herself against the deadly sickness and faintness creeping over her.

"Thank you for your help," she said. "How fortunate you were near! Is he safe?"

"He looks bad—nigh dead, I should say," answered one of the men.

"Oh, do take him to the cottage!" she cried eagerly, as she raised herself and staggered to her feet. "My father will reward you for your brave action. Where should we be now if it were not for you!"

Her unconscious coupling of the man she had saved with her own self—her anxious, compassionate gaze at his white still face—her shudder of terror at the river as its noise struck on her ear, all spoke of a new and vivid interest—a life roused from its quiet slumbers, to an awakening whose deeper import she had yet to learn.

The men touched their hats and bent down to the prostrate, senseless figure at their feet. They raised him in their arms, and bore him before her to the cottage, with its flush of summer bloom, and its calm of summer peace.

As they entered, the girl looked up at the sky overhead. The cloud had floated onward, and stood directly over her own home. There was no silver lining to its sombre darkness now.

CHAPTER II.

THE CLOUD FALLS.

ALL night in the summer stillness came the song of a nightingale from among the roses. All night with feverish restlessness a man tossed on his couch of pain. All night in the silver moon-rays a girl lay awake and uneasy, with

throbbing veins still strained and aching from that terrible weight, with sleepless eyes that would not close, and a strange dull foreboding in her heart that had never chilled its glad young beats before.

"Was life really so sad?" she wondered. "Did it hold pain so great, and woe so deep, that the heart turned to bitterness, and joy to grief, and love to hate? Would the cloud shadow her own life too, since the old man had told her none could escape?"

Through all her dreams this one thought ran, haunting her, saddening her, chilling her natural joyousness, disturbing her natural gaiety, which had been hitherto the gaiety of a child knowing nought of evil, dreading nought of pain.

With the morning the father sought the stranger's side, and dressed his wound with some of the old medical skill that he had never forgotten, though he had long ceased to practice as a physician. It was then that, for the first time, the young man learnt the story of his danger and rescue, and heard with mingled wonder and admiration of the heroism to which he owed his life.

"What can I say?" he murmured as the story ended, and the old man's voice trembled with emotion over the recital of his darling's bravery and deadly peril. "No words, no acts can ever repay such a debt. I wonder you do not hate me, seeing in my foolhardiness such risk to the life you love so well!"

"She is my only child—my all," said the old man tenderly. "To have lost her—well, there lives for me no word to paint the agony of that thought. And yet, I would not have had her act otherwise. In Heaven's sight are not all lives equal?"

"There would have been none to mourn me," said his companion sadly. "My existence is of small value in comparison with what hers seems to you."

"Ay, Heaven be praised she was spared!" was the fervent ejaculation. "But you are over young to talk of being so little missed, or cared for."

"Nevertheless, it is quite true. I am utterly friendless.

My life has been hard, loveless, toilsome; it is of small account to any one but myself."

"I hope you do not follow the cant of the day," rejoined the old man somewhat sternly, "and allow there is no good or desirable thing in life now, and therefore waste its fairest and freshest years in the exhaustion of folly, or the lawlessness of sin!"

"No; I do not hold such views. But to exhaust the follies of life and to follow its lawlessness one must be rich enough to reckon no cost, or vicious enough to stay for no better impulse. I am certainly not the one, for I am a poor man, and live by my wits. I hope I am not the other, since amidst a life that has always been hard, and a youth that has always been lonely, I have still kept faith in Heaven, and pity for man, and reverence for woman."

"Have you a mother?"

A dark shade clouded the frank young face.

"She is dead," he said. "As for other relatives, my father has disowned me. I do not even bear or know his name. Brother or sister I never possessed. I am quite alone. I believe I am entitled to be called a gentleman. I gain my bread by painting, or doing illustrations for periodicals. I live most of the year in London, and have come to this village for a month's rest, as my health has not been strong of late. There is my history, sir. It is all my introduction."

"And quite enough," said the old man heartily. "Your face is too frank and open to deceive, and I am quite sure your heart is honest too!"

He shook hands cordially with the guest so strangely brought beneath his roof, and then bade him come to the little sitting-room when he felt sufficiently rested.

"You will find Vera there," he said in his genial kindly tones, that were so frank in their cordiality, so trustful in their welcome. "My daughter, I mean."

"May I ask the favour of your name?" said the young man, smiling. "Mine is Keith Brandon. I do not know whom I have the honour of addressing."

"My name is Ashford; it used to bear the appendix of Doctor, but I have dropped it long since."

"I am not to use it, then?" questioned Keith.

"If you wish, certainly. But most of the people here know me only as "Mister," or "Maister," as they pronounce it. Now, I really must be off. You are sure you are strong enough to come downstairs?"

"Quite sure. Why, gratitude alone would give me strength, were I not all curiosity to see one who with a woman's weakness unites a man's heroism."

"You must not spoil Vera's simplicity by fine words and London manners," said the old man with sudden gravity, as he stood at the door and looked back at the handsome face and strong erect young figure in the room beyond.

"Do not be alarmed," was the gentle response. "I reverence the simplicity and guilelessness of a true woman beyond all earthly things."

"You are no true man if you did not," said Doctor Ashford gravely, and he closed the door and went downstairs to Vera with his usual calm face and tender smile.

"How is he?" the girl asked eagerly, as she came up and kissed him.

"Much better. He is coming downstairs presently. He is anxious to see you, and thank you for your bravery. Oh, my dear—my dear, I tremble even now at the thought of it. If help had not come!"

"Why trouble yourself over possibilities, father," said Vera gently. "Help did come, and there is no need to tremble. Your child is safe here, and likely to plague you a good while longer."

The old man smiled lovingly at the bright, beautiful face.

"May Heaven send all fathers such plagues!" he said tenderly. "What happy homes there would be, my darling."

"You will make me vain with so much praise," she said merrily. "Come along and have breakfast. I had better send some up for the invalid, I suppose?"

"Indeed, no, Miss Ashford; the invalid is here to answer for himself!"

At the sound of the voice she turned, the sunlight wavering over her delicate face, the look of startled wonder and of glad surprise still lighting her soft shy eyes. They looked at each other.

As their eyes met—as their hands touched—as their lips opened in the old trite world-worn greeting which we use to strangers as to friends, so surely something deeper awoke in each heart—something sweeter spoke in each glance! Then their hands loosened their clasp; but the feeling, startled into sudden life, never loosed its fast, sure links, riveted in that one brief moment, that one lingering look.

* * * * *

"So you have found a sweetheart?"

Vera was standing by the corner of a little brown shallow brook, fringed with tall bulrushes and waving willow-stems. She started as the words fell on her ear, and looked round at the speaker. The old man whom she had met in the poppy-fields some three weeks before, "the miser of the Glebe," as the villagers all called him, was standing a short distance off, leaning on his stick, and surveying her with malicious eyes and a sneering smile.

The girl's face flushed slightly beneath his scrutiny.

"What do you mean?" she asked him.

"You are still happy, are you not?"

She lifted her eyes to his with a dreamy, wistful regard.

"I am very happy."

"And who is the handsome stranger who is always by your side now? I heard of your folly in nearly sacrificing your life for his. Of course, woman-like, you will complete it by giving that life to him hereafter, to guard or wreck, as he pleases!"

She flashed on him a look of such startled pain, such speechless anger, as made the mockery of his own eyes fade.

"You have nothing to do with my actions," she said haughtily. "I scarcely think you mean to insult me, but your words are, to say the least of them, unwarrantable and incomprehensible."

He laughed.

"I thought nothing in the way of admiration was incomprehensible to women. I scarcely suppose your new friend has been with you so constantly and left you unaware of your own attractions. You must know that you are beautiful."

The proud eyes swept over his face in calm surprise.

"You are the first person who ever told me so."

"Is your lover so cold, then—or so blind?"

"How dare you use such words to me?" she said with sudden anger in her voice, and a sudden pain in her young heart. "You have no right——"

"Save my experience and your ignorance."

She shrank away with a movement of aversion.

"You need not remind me of that. If experience turns all fair and holy things to bitterness and contempt, I pray I may never exchange my ignorance for it!"

The keen eyes of the old man sparkled with malignant mirth. He liked to rouse the gentleness and calm of this girl's spirit to something more akin to wrath and bitterness than she herself was aware of.

"Keep that ignorance then, my dear," he said ironically, as she moved away with a slight bow of farewell. "Keep it with its twin-sister—Content. When you part with them your life's happiness goes too!"

She made no answer, but turned away hurt and pained, and left him by the brook-side in the evening shadows.

But as she went homewards she could not forget his words. They had stirred her heart from its rest; they had left her with memories whose innocent shame tortured her as nothing in all her bright glad life had ever done before. Hitherto her heart had leaped to the gladness of youth; the mere sense of living and enjoying the simple, innocent life she had known. Now a new

element had arisen in that life, and through the golden haze of pure faiths, and trustful hopes, and fairy dreams, another face looked back to hers, another future met and paused beside her own.

The old man's words had shown her this, and left her disturbed and saddened all at once. This stranger whose life she has saved, whose presence had haunted her for those few short weeks, had grown unaccountably dear, though no word of love, or glance of passion had lived in his speech or look.

She did not know—how could she?—the conflict that he waged each day, each hour that found him in her presence. She could not guess how hard it was to restrain every look and every word that might betray his own secret. She did not know that being in his own sight a nameless, obscure, toiling son of fortune, he, therefore, deemed it dishonourable to awaken either interest or regard for himself in the girl's fancies, knowing that to take, or seek to take her from the safety and innocence of her sheltered life, and ask her to battle with him through the stern and sordid ordeal which his own future represented, was a thing utterly impossible to his generous nature and his chivalrous love. Therefore he guarded himself so closely, and betrayed by no word or sign the weakness that at times she unconsciously tempted almost beyond endurance. Therefore it was that he said to himself, as he wrestled with a love that every day but strengthened and increased, "I will leave her unwooed. So best!"

Perhaps some vague hope of a future when he might win her arose at times in his heart. Some vision of a fame he might touch, a fortune he might secure. Then, he told himself, he might speak. Now it looked to him unmanly to do so.

"She will never know," he thought. "She is but a child still."

But do what he might, he could not forget her—he could not care for her less. With one look she had shattered the serenity of his whole previous life, and left

to him a memory that was precious and painful both in one, and had given him along with its preciousness a weary self-contest that brought but little hope of peace, but little care for victory. For he loved her too well to forget, and between them lay a barrier that it would be the work of years to overthrow, the foe of many a youthful love—poverty.

He had grown accustomed to shifts and straits for himself; to go without meals; to deny himself all but bare necessities; to live from hand to mouth, toiling, working, struggling, fighting single-handed in a great city's warfare; but to ask her to share such a life, or risk such straits, with only his arm to lean on, his love to recompense, was what he had no courage to do.

He was her debtor. Could he ask her to take such recompense as this? Could he repay thus the noble heroism that had risked life in his service without a thought of consequence?

All the manhood in him rebelled against the thought. He crushed down the impotent desires that stung him to madness—the passionate longings which strove ever and always to tear aside the mask of impassiveness he wore—the regrets that no power of his own could lull to rest.

"I must leave her," he told himself. "I cannot dare not stay here longer! With each day my strength grows less!"

Even as the words were on his lips he met her face to face.

She was coming home with the old man's taunts still fresh in her memory—with the shame his words had awakened, still burning in her innocent heart.

As she saw him the colour flushed from brow to throat. Her eyes drooped. The usual welcome died on her lips unspoken.

"I am glad to have met you," he said, with his usual courteous gentleness. "I was about to call at the cottage to say farewell. I leave to-morrow."

She started slightly. Had he but looked at her he

would have seen the sudden pallor of the sweet face, the flash of pain in the wistful eyes. But he was looking far beyond, to where the sun-rays touched the river's quiet breast with slanting bars of gold.

"It is sudden—is it not?" she said at length.

Her voice sounded cold because of its hard-won firmness, her cheek flushed back to warmth with sudden pride.

"Yes," he answered, looking at her face now, but unable to meet the eyes she steadfastly averted. "It is sudden. I am grieved to go. I have been so happy here; I shall never forget this place, or *you!*"

At those words she flushed with sudden colour—her eyes drooped shyly—her whole frame thrilled with an ecstasy strange and wholly sweet.

"I—I am sorry you must go!" she said hesitatingly, "And my father will miss you."

"Shall *you* miss me, Vera?" he asked, forgetting prudence and restraint now as he gazed on the lovely troubled face, the loose clasped hands that trembled visibly before the rush of emotion that filled her whole being in this moment.

She raised her eyes—the rose-flush in her cheeks deepened—a half sigh parted her quivering lips.

"Yes," she said simply.

He bent and kissed her hands.

"Don't forget me," he said hoarsely, as he strove to rein in the fiery tumult of words that longed for utterance; "for I shall think of you always, night and day—till I return."

* * * * *

A moment later she stood there alone, her eyes on a retreating figure, her hands clasped tight on her fast-throbbing heart.

With all her pain a thrill of gladness mingled.

"The cloud has a silver lining," she said softly. "He said he would return."

And with the music of those words in her memory, she passed across the yellow corn-fields, and took the path-way home.

"I am sorry young Brandon has gone!" said the old doctor that evening as, leaning on Vera's arm, he paced up and down the little garden. "I shall miss him very much."

Vera was silent.

"I wish I could have learnt more of his history," resumed her father. "He goes by his mother's name. She never would tell him his father's. She had been cruelly wronged, and driven from his roof with her infant son, and only the charity of strangers stood between her and starvation. From what Keith says she must have been a noble woman."

"And she is dead now?"

"Yes, my child—dead—with her honour tarnished by a cruel lie, and her son's life darkened by an unmerited shame. It is very sad—very sad."

"He is clever. He has great gifts!" sighed the girl with an unconscious pathos.

"Yes; he is both gifted and noble. But he is so poor and in the world genius always suffers in the grasp of poverty—it is a mortal foe. The man who can dower genius with success lives in a palace—the man who owns it in a hovel. The one who buys is great, the one who creates, may want bread, or be thankful for a beggar's crust. Yes, it is strange, but true."

"There is not much happiness, then, in the world?" questioned the girl, to whom all knowledge of its miseries and sins and woes were alike unknown.

"My dear, there is happiness everywhere for those who seek it aright; but it is a word of many meanings, though the true meaning is only—there!"

He pointed up to the radiant heavens as they stretched in cloudless calm above his head. The girl's face grew awed and pale as she looked at him, then suddenly she

drew his arms around her and laid her head upon his breast.

"You have made all my life's happiness for me," she said. "How good you are—how good!"

"My love, none are that!" he said tenderly. "Being mortals, and being weak through sin within and beset by sin without, how could it be otherwise?"

"Do you know anything of the old man at the Glebe?" asked Vera presently. "He speaks to me sometimes, but he is very hard and very bitter."

"I only know him by what the people here say," answered her father. "That he is miserly and eccentric, and lives quite alone, save for the old witch-like woman who attends to his simple wants. I have never exchanged words with him since I lived here."

"I feel sorry for him," continued the girl pityingly. "And he talks so strangely to me always. He seems to resent the mere fact of my being glad and light-hearted as an injury to himself. He warned me one day that every life had its shadow, its days of woe, and darkness, and grief; that mine would come too. If they do—papa, papa! what is it?"

The awful agonised cry that left her lips was echoed by a groan of mortal agony. The old man's feeble form seemed to slip from her childish arms, and he lay on the grass at her feet like a felled dog, in the grasp of that terrible foe—paralysis.

The girl's shrieks quickly brought the old woman-servant from the house, but their united strength was unequal to the task of carrying that helpless burden. Aid had to be procured from the village, and medical assistance summoned; but the old doctor's great age rendered science of no avail. He lived for a week unconscious, then died in his child's arms.

Over her life the cloud and darkness of a great sorrow had indeed fallen.

CHAPTER III.

"THE SILVER LINING."

IT was all over.

The funeral had taken place, the few necessary arrangements had been made, and Vera awoke from the pain and lethargy of grief to the startling fact that she was alone in the world, and penniless.

What little money her father had, just sufficed to pay the necessary expenses of his death-bed; but for her there was nothing save the cottage. If she lived in it, what was she to do to earn her bread—to support herself and the faithful old woman, who had lived in their service over twenty years, and mourned her master's death as deeply almost as his child?

To be poor was nothing very terrible to one who had never known riches; but the necessity of doing something, of turning from dreams to work, from dependence on another to dependence on herself alone at first fell upon her with the cruel sharpness of necessity, and a sense of the bitter helplessness of youth and womanhood.

The rector's wife advised her to become a governess, though she had so few accomplishments, and promised to write and interest friends on her behalf. Vera had never liked the fussy, patronizing little woman, and liked her still less when she came full of advice and suggestions to intrude on her grief.

Human interests and human sympathy seemed alike indifferent to her now. It was so terrible to think of the love she had lost, the sympathy, and tenderness, and care which had guarded her life so long, and were now for ever fled beyond recall.

It was about a week after her father's death when, as

she sat alone in the little parlour in the summer dusk, old Dorcas, the servant, entered.

"If you please, Miss Vera," she said, "there's a strange-looking body without who wants speech of you. She says she comes from the Glebe."

The girl raised her pale sad face from her hands.

"Tell her to come in here," she said listlessly. "I will see her."

A moment after an old, bent, witch-like woman entered—a woman with a brown wrinkled face, and hard fierce eyes, and long, bird-like, quivering fingers, that clutched her ragged shawl as she spoke.

"You wished to see me?" said Vera gently.

"He bade me come," mumbled the old creature indistinctly. "He bade me haste and say he was ill—a-dying, he thinks—he would see you at once."

"Whom do you mean?" asked the girl, in wonder.

"My master—the miser' they call him. Ay, and a miser he is, sure enough, and gold heaped up there like dust, and he stinting, and starving, and hoarding ail the time. But he is ill now—very ill. He would see you at once."

She mumbled and muttered the words in strange disjointed fragments as Vera sat gazing at her, half in wonder, half in fear.

"He lies a-dying," she repeated, as though she found some inward pleasure in the sound of the words; "and all the good gold heaped up and none to gather—none to gather—kith and kin all dead and gone. Ah, it is a fine world—a fine world!"

"Is he really so ill?"

"He lies a-dying," she repeated. "He bade me come; he would have no doctor—none, only you. Are you coming?"

"Yes; I will follow you."

"Indeed, miss, and you don't go to that heathenish place at this time of night alone," interposed old Dorcas, who was still lingering near the door.

"Who will harm her, do you think?" chuckled the old crone. "Not he, the old miser—he is a-dying. Alack! the good gold! who will have it now?"

And nodding her head, and muttering half aloud, half to herself, she turned and went out of the open door; Vera followed, and old Dorcas, staying only for a shawl to wrap around her, started in pursuit.

Along the quiet roads and through the dewy fields they moved slowly and silently, Vera bewildered by the strange summons, the old women each engrossed by their own thoughts.

It was some twenty minutes before they reached the obsolete, neglected-looking abode known as the Glebe, and then the old crone paused, and took a key from her dress and unlocked the door, which creaked hideously as it opened. Then she led the way up the weed-covered, moss-grown paths, and to the back entrance of the great, gloomy building, which was almost falling to pieces with long neglect.

Quite silently, and half-awed by the weird, intense stillness that brooded everywhere, Vera and her companion followed. Through the old, dim kitchen and dreary passages and carpetless rooms they passed, till at last, pointing to a door beneath which a faint ray of light streamed, the old woman bade Vera enter.

Whispering to Dorcas to remain outside but within call, the young girl opened the door, and moved quickly and almost noiselessly across the shadowy chamber.

It was a gaunt, musty, dreary room, very bare and very cold; even the summer heat that reigned without seemed chilled here, and Vera shivered as she stood beside the great funereal bedstead, and looked down on the withered face all grey with pain, and lined with the weariness of age. He glanced up as the shadow fell across him.

"You have come?"

That was all his greeting. Vera touched his restless, feverish hands with her cool, slim fingers.

"Yes," she said; "you sent for me?"

"And you could humour an old man's fancy even in your grief?"

"I was sorry for you—are you very ill?"

"My hour has come, I suppose," he said grimly. "I do not complain; I have already lived beyond man's allotted span. Do you wonder why I have sent for you?"

"You need help, or nursing, perhaps?"

"Help—nursing? No such woman's follies for me! No, girl, I sent for you for far different reasons. Let me look at you first. Ah, there is a change! The shadow has fallen, has it not?"

The pale lips quivered, the beautiful eyes filled with tears.

"Can you ask?" she said sadly.

"I was a true prophet, you see. Well, on the whole, I am sorry—the gladness suited you better. Now a few words will tell you why I sent for you here to-night. You are poor and you are alone?"

"Yes," she said sorrowfully, as he paused.

"I know all, and I hear all, you see—the old miser is neither so blind nor so deaf as folks say. Well, you can be rich—ay, rich as any lady in the land; you can have everything your heart desires, everything that a woman loves, if you will. Does the prospect allure you?"

"No."

"No?" He laughed his short caustic laugh. "Well, you are different to most of your sex, then—for gold they would sell their very souls. Let me paint the other side of the picture. In the life before you, you will be poor, nameless, dependent, at the mercy of women more pitiless on the weak and dependent of their own sex than any man would have the heart to be; you will drudge, and slave, and toil; you will miss all sympathy, kindness, forbearance; you will lose your beauty and your youth in the ceaseless effort to gain your daily bread; a life of hardships of which you cannot dream, and tortures you cannot imagine, opens out in your future. On the other hand, I would offer you peace, wealth, honour, the power

to benefit others. Ah! that touches you, I see—the opportunity of doing endless good, of winning happiness, of bestowing it as you please. All this I give you with gold—for gold is the compeller of all things good and great, the key that unlocks all doors and opens them to fame, success, greatness. Nay, do not speak yet. I have neither kith nor kin; I will give all I have to you for no other reason save that your beauty and gladness attracted me long ago by their very contrast to my own decrepitude and hard-heartedness. I mean to make you my heiress; but first I place these two alternatives before you—poverty and degradation, or honour and wealth with but one condition attached.”

“What is that?”

“Wait a moment. I wish I could paint the power you will inherit better than I do.”

“Why did you not use it better yourself?” she interrupted. “If the gold was yours, had you not the power also?”

His face grew dark and stormy.

“My life turned to bitterness—my love to hate long since; ask no more. The condition with which I saddle this legacy is very simple. A woman young, fair, wealthy, as you will be, has the world at her feet—can choose her lovers where she will. Of all you may choose I withhold one—it is the sole condition attached to wealth that a queen might envy.”

“Who is that one?” she asked, flushing hotly beneath his keen glance, and painfully embarrassed by a conversation so strange as this.

“He goes by the name of Keith Brandon. He was once—my son.”

She started as though a knife had stabbed her; every flush of colour left her face. White and quivering, and mute, she stood there with the strangeness and horror of those words thrilling through every fibre of her frame; “Your son? And you could wrong him thus?”

“I mistake,” said the old man fiercely. “I should

have said, his mother was my wife. She married me for my gold—hence its curse; she never loved me; she turned my life into hell; she——”

“Oh, hush! hush!” cried the girl. “Indeed, you are wrong; she was maligned, slandered, and you believed too easily. Could a guilty mother bear such a son? Could his every memory of her be as fond, and pure, and tender as it is, were she indeed what you believed? Oh, listen, and for once have mercy. I know him, he was here a short time ago; all that old sad story of his youth and suffering I learnt. Oh, if you could but see him, hear him, you would know you wrong him. If honour ever lived in mortal man, it was in him!”

He stared at her aghast.

“What do you know?” he said. “How dare you champion one whose very name I abhor—whose mother’s memory has poisoned all good, or glad, or holy things within me for thirty weary years?”

“I know him,” the girl said very gently. “I heard this story from his own lips.”

“You know him? Are you mad?”

“He was here but a short time ago—surely you knew. The stranger whom you saw with me was called Keith Brandon; if that is your son’s name, this stranger was your son!”

“My son!”

He fell back on his pillow, the damp dew standing bead-like on his brow; his face grey with the ashen hues of death, and the fierce agony that was rending his heart.

“The draught—quick!” he gasped.

Vera seized the bottle to which he pointed, and poured out the quantity directed into a glass; very tenderly she supported him, and wiped the damp, cold sweats from his brow, and adjusted his pillows with a touch widely different from the old crone’s rough handling. The draught revived him. The grey hues faded away, and were replaced with colour more life-like. For some moments he

rested back on the pillows with closed eyes and lips, his hands alone plucking restlessly at the quilt.

Suddenly he looked up at her.

"A good girl!" he muttered. "A good girl! If Heaven had sent me such a daughter I might have been a different man."

"Heaven sent you a son," the girl answered gently. "How have you played a father's part to him?"

"Peace!" he shouted fiercely, as he raised himself again with sudden strength. "Peace, girl! What I did was right—I had proofs, every proof; she never loved me. No, it was for gold she cared—for gold. Ay, and I drove her forth to perish or not, as she pleased, while the gold for which she sold herself remained with me. I denounced her with its curse; I told her neither she nor her child should touch it. Ha! ha! it is mine still—mine!"

Vera shrank from him with sudden horror.

"Can you not turn your thoughts to softer things?" she asked. "Is a death-bed the time for anger—the place for revenge?"

"You are a good girl—yes," he muttered in the old rambling way. "But is what you say true?—do you indeed know my son?"

"I know Keith Brandon, as I told you before."

"That man—that man," he went on muttering, "with the bright, handsome eyes, the frank young face; he spoke to me once, so courteously, so kindly, and I—I for once was weak enough to wish he were—my son."

"Will you not see him—hear his story yourself?" asked Vera beseechingly. "I pray it now for your own sake, and for his. May I not send? I know where he lives."

"No—a thousand times, no!" he shouted fiercely, raising himself on the pillows with the old angry light flashing into his hollow eyes once more. "If I saw him, I might believe, I should be again deceived. No, girl—no! as I have lived so will I die—wifeless, childless. Let my will stand; the wealth is yours!"

"I will not take it—not one single shilling of it all," said the girl haughtily. "It is your son's by every right—by every law. To him does it justly belong. A poor recompense at best for a neglected youth, a toilsome, hopeless manhood, an alien name."

"You plead for him with rare eloquence," said the old man, with that strange, sarcastic smile curving his lips once more. "Well, remember it is in your power to beggar him. If you refuse my wealth, I shall not will it to him any the more. If you accept it, I withdraw my condition for—your sake."

"Are you a man and can talk thus?" cried the girl, flushing and quivering with the shame and humiliation enforced upon her. "You must know that, with condition or not, it is equally impossible for any one to do him justice save yourself."

For she knew her undeclared lover well enough to be only too certain that her riches would be a barrier ten thousand times more formidable than his poverty, and that this hateful wealth could never come to him through her. And she was right.

With sudden tenderness she passed to the old man's side, and bent over him. "Listen!" she said. "It is not for me to counsel or advise, for I am young and ignorant, and a woman; but this I must say. You tell me you are ill—dying. Well, can you die with your conscience burdened by a sin to one who is innocent and good? Can you meet your injured wife, and know that you have left in poverty, and degradation, and need, her still more injured son; for he—what has he done that you should be so unforgiving? And oh, think even if your son has erred, or your wife has wronged you, that One who suffered death at a traitor's hands, bade us forgive until seventy times seven."

As her voice fell hushed and solemn across the silence of the dreary room, as the hot tears dimmed her sad young eyes with the intense pity and the intense longing that filled her soul, the old man's iron calm forsook him—

the long-sealed fountain of softness and tenderness was broken up.

Down his furrowed cheeks the slow, salt tears of age were silently coursing; into his heart some old forgotten memory crept of the wife he had loved, of the little babe whose innocent eyes had smiled on him, whose waxen fingers had touched his own.

"God forgive me!" he murmured, in sorrowful, broken words. "Perhaps I have wronged them both!"

* * * * *

When morning dawned it saw a great wrong rectified, a great sorrow healed. It saw father and son reconciled; it saw the wife's name honoured and blessed by the dying breath of the man who for thirty years had wronged, and doubted, and neglected her; it saw two young lovers, hand in hand, kneeling beside that couch of pain until the sun rose in triumphant glory, and for both living and dead there dawned the peace of perfect day.

THE END.



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